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THE YES MAN

By MARGARET LANGMAID

MEET Johnny Hammond, the Yes Man. His genial face sets everyone asking favours of him. He spends his life carrying other people's parcels, as it were, and holding open doors. And he isn't always thanked for it, either.

And meet Philip Hunt, who merely flips his fingers and gets what he wants. He is used to it.

And meet Susan Clifford, the harried young "schoolmarm." People walk over Susan. She is just that kind of person. But she finds someone she can walk over in her turn—the Yes Man.

And then watch them, all three, and see who wins in the end.

THE FIRST NOVEL BY

MARGARET LANGMAID

IS ENTITLED

THIS CHARMING PROPERTY

THE YES MAN

by

MARGARET LANGMAID

HODDER & STOUGHTON LTD
LONDON

The characters in this book are entirely imaginary,
and have no relation to any living person.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCING TWO BACHELORS AND A YOUNG "SCHOOLMARM"

HALF-PAST seven on a July morning, in Baker Street, and the sun was shining. The west side was ablaze with it. Flaring shop windows, and a splash of blue paint here, and white there. And the American cloth curtains over Killick's (artists' supplies) edging themselves out stiffly in the breeze and shining like heliographs. And the glass-bowl lampstands in Roger Mason's looking like fiery balloons. And over Laura Buley's ("Let Laura Buley dress you") a red-haired woman tending a box of marigolds.

But none of them could stand up to Hunt and Hammond's. It might be battleship grey in its more sober moments, but full in the morning sun it was almost silver. It had a twenty-foot sweep of window. To the left of it, preening themselves in their elegant dust-covers, were two brief shelves-full of books. Towards the centre was a glazed black pot. Hand-made by a master, if the price were anything to go by. And to the right a water-colour—very appropriate to the time of day—of a heavy young female at her toilet.

Half-past seven, and a respectable little figure in a bowler hat hurrying up to the grey door at the side. He slipped in a key, picked up a couple of milk-bottles,

closed the door softly behind him, and hung up the bowler hat on a hook in the passage wall. Then he went through to the kitchen, donned an apron from the dresser drawer, and put a kettle of water on the gas.

While it was coming to the boil he bustled about the shop with a duster, his round little face gravely intent. More shelves, running in wild steps up and down the walls. Grey limed oak, and full of more books and more pots. He gave them all a careful flick. He adjusted the angle of a bronze statuette. Then he hurried back to the kitchen.

He busied himself earnestly over the making of tea. He set out a tray with two cups on it, the teapot and a jug of milk, and bore it upstairs. On the upper landing he paused, filled one of the cups and set it down on the floor. Then, splaying a hand under the tray, he opened the door of the front bedroom, and entered.

The sun again, streaming over the floor and over the bed and on to a black head on the pillow.

"Good morning, Mr. Hunt."

The head moved and a lean face appeared, dark almost to swarthiness. The eyes opened, and narrowed sharply again.

"Hullo, Ellis. Pull those flaming curtains for God's sake, before I'm blinded!"

Ellis put the tray down on a table and pulled the curtains. Then he came back and poured out Hunt's first cup of tea, and, moving away to the door, left him in possession of the teapot.

"All right now, Mr. Hunt?"

Hunt nodded, yawning and stretching his silk-pyjamaed arms.

"Might turn on the bath for me," he said.

Ellis made off to the end of the passage to turn on the bath. The towels were rather bedraggled, so he set out clean ones. Finally he returned to the solitary cup and saucer that he had left standing on the floor. He opened the door of a back bedroom.

"Good morning, Mr. Hammond."

A pair of towering knees in the centre of the bed. A face turned up to the ceiling, lost in pleasant dreams. An inch of clipped fair beard jutting over the edge of the sheet.

No need to bother with any curtain-pulling in here, anyway. The sun didn't trouble Hammond's room.

Ellis shook the mountain of knees and put the cup down. Hammond awoke with a jerk.

"Oh, thanks. Thanks, Ellis." He sat up and rumpled his hair and smoothed it again. He drank the tea straight off. It was usually cool enough for that. "What's the weather doing?"

"Nice and sunny." Ellis was at the door again.

"Fine! I was hoping it would be. I want to get going. Think I could bag the bathroom before Hunt to-day?"

"I'm afraid Mr. Hunt's water's already running, sir."

Ellis went downstairs and laid the breakfast-table in the living-room. He cut a grapefruit in two. It was strange, he thought, that however careful he was, one piece was always larger than the other. Still, it wasn't much of a problem to decide who had which.

He was frizzling bacon over the stove when he became aware of a brisk draught. The street door of

the shop was open. A tall figure was lounging there, just inside it, smoking.

"Mr. Hammond," he called, "if you're not doing anything, I'd be very obliged if you could keep your eye on the toast."

The figure turned inquiringly, and Ellis had a better look at it.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Hunt," he said. "I thought it was Mr. Hammond."

He put two pieces of bread under the grill.

"It's you wearing Mr. Hammond's dressing-gown," he added in explanation. "You're much the same from the back."

Hunt went on smoking, one long leg crossed over the other. Laura Buley, next door, was out on the pavement now, surveying her window-display. She had on a string-coloured linen dress of the homespun variety, and sandal shoes on her bare feet. As she turned her head this way and that, her bright hair fell over her face.

She saw Hunt suddenly and nodded at him. He nodded back.

"Nice bit of sun," she called out.

"Very pleasant," he said.

"Isn't this the day Sir Francis Drake goes off to Clayle for his holiday?"

"He is due off to-day—yes."

"Going to feel lonely?"

"Not particularly, but I'll say 'yes' again, if that's the correct answer."

"Well, I'm having another gathering at the end of the week. Not that you'll be missed if you don't come, but you'll be quite welcome if you do."

"Thanks," he said.

She turned her face back to her window. Hunt stood idly watching her until she at length walked in again.

He threw away his cigarette and closed and bolted the shop door. He remained still for awhile, looking around him. Then he began to wander here and there, readjusting the position of the three water-colours on their shelves against the farther wall, running his long-fingered hands down the bronze statuette. He picked up the black pot from the window and turned it slowly round, a deep contentment in his eyes.

Ellis was clicking his tongue out in the kitchen.

"That's a nuisance, now! That's a nuisance!"

Hunt put the pot down again, lingeringly.

"I cracked it just as carefully as the other one," Ellis said, "and now the yolk's run all over the white."

Hunt sauntered out.

"What? Oh, Hammond's egg. He won't notice that. He'll be too full of his holiday."

Hammond came down in due course, in pale flannel trousers and a check flannel shirt. His fair skin was ruddy and glowing. (He took his baths cold.) His beard had been trimmed exceptionally close. Hunt eyed it.

"Getting the wind up over showing that off in the old home town?" he asked as they sat down at the table.

Hammond laughed, stabbing blithely at his leathery egg. Then his forehead puckered a little.

"You know, I really ought to have left yesterday,

or Saturday," he said. "It would have saved this hell of a rush. If only you hadn't had to bag the car for last night——"

"Oh, it only takes a couple of hours or so, doesn't it? And you don't have to turn up at the school till two, do you? By the way, were you thinking of giving away the prizes in that shirt?"

"It isn't a Prizegiving," Hammond explained patiently. "It's an Open Day. All I've got to do is park myself on the platform and listen to 'em sing, and what not. Or breeze round the classrooms and look at their needlework."

"In that shirt?"

Hammond glanced down at it uneasily.

"Oh, well—I'll have to get hold of something quieter on the way. If only I'd left yesterday——"

"I'll be thinking of you, strutting up and down the gangways and admiring their camisoles." Hunt was blatantly amused. "The School" was a standing joke with him. "Aren't you beginning to wish your great-grandpa had never founded the place?"

Hammond, buttering his toast, grinned amiably.

"Oh, I don't mind taking an interest," he said. "Up to me now, anyway. The last of the Hammonds, and all that. It gives 'em the personal touch, and I might get quite a kick out of it. *And* a good old-fashioned holiday for once, while I'm about it."

"Looking forward to it, aren't you? A fortnight stuck down there, and you want to go! 'So this is the house where I was born!' I can just about see you!"

"Funny I haven't been back since I was a kid." Hammond went on smarming his butter ruminatively.

"People I remember there—— And they'll remember me. I'll only have to tell 'em who I am."

"And *this* is little Johnny Hammond?" Hunt observed. "My God!"

Hammond chewed his toast.

"How's the car going for oil and petrol?" he asked after a moment.

"Er——" Hunt paused so long that Hammond looked up at him. "I—er—I wanted to speak to you about that, as a matter of fact. I was wondering —I say, Hammond, you won't need the car down there half as much as I shall up here."

"Wha——"

"Going to lounge around and take it easy, aren't you? It's only the journey you wanted it for, when you come to boil it down. You said you weren't going to dash about all the time. Can't you go down by train, like a good chap, and leave it with me?"

"Look here," said Hammond, when he could get a word in. "I pay my share of that —— car, and if I can't have the use of it over the only proper holiday I'll get in the year——"

"And leave it stewing in a garage till the day you come back, probably! I've got to carry on here till your spell's over, haven't I? Suppose I want to get out a bit, on a hot evening? And what about the week-ends? What do I do then? Go for a bus-ride?"

Hammond rasped a hand over his face, desperately.

"Why couldn't we have gone into this yesterday? It was all taken for granted. I hung about until to-day because you wanted it last night!"

Hunt was regretful.

"I know. But first I thought I'd mention it, then I thought I wouldn't."

"And now you've just thought you would again?"

"Yes. I decided I'd put it to you."

Hammond gazed down at his empty plate. In his disappointment, his face looked as young as a schoolboy's.

"Oh, all right!" he said at last. "All right!"

Clayle, on the Kent coast, at half-past seven in the morning. And where the waves splashed on to the shingle, hilarious groups taking their before-breakfast dip.

It was quieter in Adelaide Road, a hundred yards back. Here were long front gardens, and sedate little porches, and houses of dull grey stone. And a venerable tree or two, and surely more geraniums to the square foot than anywhere else in the county. And here, towards one end of the row, impressively bay-windowed and out-geraniuming the lot of them, was the residence of Mr. Clifford the bank manager.

That was Mr. Clifford's face at the large front bedroom window at the moment. He was modestly drawing the velour curtains before he began to dress. The young man walking up the path in a belted macintosh buttoned up to the neck, and string-soled bathing-shoes, was David, Mr. Clifford's son. And the top of the head just showing through the smaller front bedroom belonged to Susan, Mr. Clifford's daughter.

She was sitting in her slip at the dressing-table, her hair tucked behind her ears, and a double pile of exercise books in front of her.

There wasn't much room for them, even with the

brushes turned off on to the floor, and the powder-bowl and scent-spray on to the window-sill. And having to twist her legs round one side of her chair was becoming a trifle irksome. But the idea of adjourning downstairs was out of the question. Up here, she could pretend she was still dressing. She might have time to get the lot finished.

She shook her pen out on to a wad of blotting-paper, and dabbed at an inkstain on her middle finger.

"I cannot read your writing," she wrote.

She could hear her father moving about in the next room, and her mother had been awake some five minutes. That was obvious from the fact that she had been talking for just that length of time. Her voice sounded strange when you couldn't hear what she was saying. It was full of intonations, all up and down the scale.

Now she was quiet. Mr. Clifford had gone off to the bathroom. Susan rapidly added three more to the "marked" pile. "Fair," "Be careful of spelling," and, "Bring your book to me."

She was within a dozen of the end when the voice from next door suddenly made up for lost time.

"Susan!"

Susan had particularly large and round eyes. When she was startled they turned larger and rounder than ever. They were doing it now.

"Yes?" she said.

"Do you know it's nearly ten to eight?"

"Oh, is it? I'm just going down."

She hurried across to the wardrobe and took out a yellow dress, with a jaunty organdie collar. She unhooked the price-ticket from the back of the neck,

pulled the dress over her head, and drew the belt as tightly as it would go round her slim middle. Then a harassed spate of words from next door set her on the move again. She ran downstairs, threw a cloth on the dining-room table and dashed out and in once more with a load of cups and saucers.

She was at the stove when David walked downstairs, hitching his tie and working his neck in his stiff white collar. His hair was nearly dry now, and had formed itself into its usual quiff in front.

"Here—good Lord!" he exclaimed. "You've only just started!"

"I won't be long. I wanted to finish those compositions."

"Why have you got that on?"

"Open Day. I'm trying to pretend it's something to dress up for."

"Well, if you think that colour——"

"Trying to forget it'll be the worst nightmare of the term."

"If it were cut a bit plainer——"

"Just trying to persuade myself——"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Susan! Not so early in the morning! Can't you drop this 'nightmare' business, anyway? You've been at it ever since you've been there."

"And I'll be at it until I leave, or walk off the end of the pier!"

"Oh, you make me—— Here, what's that burning? The toast?"

"Susan!" shrieked the voice from upstairs. "Something's burning!"

Susan went out to the dustbin with the toast.

"Personal visit of J. H. himself, of course," she said. "And it's been Lord help us all for the last week!"

"I thought he was dead. Didn't you say he died just before you went there?"

"This is his son. There's always another one."

Mr. Clifford was coming down. He went into the dining-room, and they could hear him crackling the newspaper. In due course Susan hurried in with the tea. He was standing in the centre of the window. No need for modesty now, in all the glory of his black coat and striped trousers, and the bald crown of his head carefully swathed in the band of hair which he grew six inches long for that purpose. He glanced across at her.

"You're not going to school in that, are you?" he said.

"Yes. It's Open Day. I thought I'd try to——"

"Open Day? Oh, yes." He went back to his paper. "That'll be nice."

"It'll be awful."

"M'm?" He was turning a page.

"I said it'll be awful. As bad as every other day. Worse."

Mr. Clifford put the paper down.

"Not all over again, Susan, if you don't mind. *Not* all over again! We're rather late with our breakfast, aren't we? Does it happen to be ready?"

She dished up the breakfast, and after a few minutes she left them both to it and sidled into the drawing-room. Just time to run through "Where the Bee Sucks" again. Any slips in the accompaniment this afternoon, and there would be plain hell to pay.

She sat down at the piano, and jammed her foot on the soft pedal, and began.

A chair rasped in the dining-room. A knife and fork clattered. But the voice from upstairs got in first.

"Susan, do stop it, please!"

Perhaps there wasn't really time, anyway. There were her sandwiches to cut. She ran out to the larder, looked here and there nonchalantly at first, then a shade feverishly. She went to the foot of the stairs.

"Mother!"

"Well?"

"Didn't you get that ham after all?"

"What ham?"

"You know I said Miss Booth told us to bring our lunch to-day, to save time."

"Oh. No, I forgot it, I'm afraid, dear. Can't you use hard-boiled eggs?"

"There isn't time to boil them, let alone hard!"

"Oh, well—a banana, then, or something?"

Twenty to nine, and David combing out the quiff again in front of the hall mirror, and setting his hat correctly on his head. He was attached to Cradock's, the estate agent's, and was much in demand for "showing over." Appearance counted for a good deal in a job like his, he reflected, pulling at his waistcoat and adjusting his lapels.

As he shut the door, Susan emerged from the kitchen with her case. It was bulging ominously, and felt as heavy as lead. Another day, trailing out with it. And were two wrappers enough, round the sandwiches?

Terrible if any of that wretched banana got on to the compositions.

She was putting on her gloves when a rustling came down the stairs—Mrs. Clifford, a "fine figure of a woman," thrusting herself well out above the waist, and holding herself well in below it. Her hair was a corrugation of tight waves, secured by numerous grips. And her face was all set to burst into its usual smile. How she could smile! Vivacious, people called her.

The daily girl was just about due, and there was Mr. Clifford to be seen off. Mrs. Clifford always liked to do that. She liked to wave him down the path and perhaps blow him a kiss as he took off his hat to her at the gate. She was incurably romantic.

"Good-bye, Mother." Susan made for the door. But the voice came after her.

"Susan, surely you're not going to wear that to——"

Susan shut the door quickly behind her and hurried along the path.

More macintoshes and bare legs, up and down the side-streets. Flannels and blazers. Towels hung out on window-sills. People idling back from the news-agent's with their papers, reading them as they went. All day to read them in, if they wanted to.

She struck off to the right, still hurrying. Past the Victoria Park. May Barnes and Mary Hooper were over by the fountain. She could recognize them at a glance. They were both in her class. There was some business afoot with the water. They were screeching, darting away, uniting again to clutch at each other with yells of laughter. Sometimes she dreamt about those two. Anything was liable to cause it. Too many blankets over her, or merely lying on her back.

A S · Aug 8 1919

She left the Park behind. Another turn, and another. There were Elliot and Barrett ahead of her. Barrett in her loose black silk coat and Elliot in her tweeds and pork-pie hat. And from this direction and that, small groups of twos and threes pouring through a gateway set in a long iron railing. It always reminded Susan of water running into a drain.

The "John Hammond," across an asphalt playground. An oblong block on the left—"Infants." An L-shaped one in the middle—"Girls." Another oblong, larger, at the right—"Boys."

She walked through "Girls." It had a centre doorway, in the angle of the L, and inside, straight opposite, was the staff-room. Barrett and Elliot were dimly visible through the frosted glass—Barrett as a long, thin blur and Elliot as a portly one.

Susan pushed at the door and entered.

". . . history notebooks," Barrett was saying. "I've got quite a good set. She said they can have them out. And their garments, of course. She even told me herself they were—— Good morning, Clifford. She hasn't come yet, has she? Have you seen her anywhere about?"

"Good morning, Miss Barrett. Morning, Miss Elliot. No, I haven't seen her."

"That gives us a minute to breathe, anyway. I couldn't stand any chivvying this morning." Barrett walked across to the glass and eased up her bands of grey hair with a pencil.

Susan slipped off her coat, to a sudden silence. Oh, the new dress. Well, let them stare. Nothing mattered much, anyway, except the fact that there were now less than ten minutes to go. Footsteps becoming

more continuous in the corridor, doors opening and shutting, classrooms filling up. No going back, no getting out of it. Nothing to do but work straight through the day. And to-morrow, and the next. And the next. And the next——

"New frock?" Elliot asked amiably. "Is that what you call primrose?"

Susan smiled, and her whole face changed for a second.

"No. Honey, or amber, or something."

"My—word!"

"Don't forget we've got to get in quicker for prayers this morning, Elliot," Barrett cut in. "If she once gets rattled over a late start, she'll be like it for the rest of the day."

"No good asking for *that* in an O.S.," observed Elliot. "But if I had a shape anything like yours I'd wear honey myself, and she could say what she liked."

"And I was telling you——" Barrett went on. "History notebooks and their garments out on the desks——"

"My crayon-work'll have to go in cases after all," said Elliot. "They'd smudge it all over their sleeves before they'd finished."

Their voices struck vaguely at the back of Susan's brain as she stood looking out of the window at the chicken-run beyond the low school wall.

". . . darning specimens and a few samples of turning-the-heel——"

". . . 'Shepherds' Hey' and 'Gathering Peascods' out in the playground. They'll have to hum the tunes. Can't get the piano out——"

" . . . must stop them from holding their Mothers' Meetings all over the place, and forgetting what they came here for——"

" . . . if he treats her in a 'What is it?' kind of way, like his father used to—she was always scared stiff of him, underneath——"

" . . . why on earth he couldn't have said he was ill, or something——"

" . . . show of maps on the blackboard——"

" . . . that clay model of the river-basin——"

They had paused. A bustling blur was passing in the corridor. There came the brisk click of a door, movement in the adjoining room. " She " had arrived.

" We'll have to get going." Elliot made a lightning change into her one-bar house-shoes. She glanced up at an empty peg. " Pity Fowler's not here yet."

Fowler was usually on the late side, and usually caught.

They hurried out together. Susan was left still standing there. Going out meant going straight into it. Well, she'd got to go straight into it. No good putting it off minute after minute.

Movement next door again. The bustling form came back down the corridor and entered in a flurry of skirts. It always seemed to Susan that she must wear at least three. She could never get that billowing effect without.

" Good morning, Miss Clifford. Hadn't you better go to your class? I can hear them all down the passage."

" Yes, I was just going, Miss Booth."

" But surely you don't think that's suitable for school wear? "

"Oh, I thought—— Open Day——"

"It's Open Day I'm thinking of too. Visitors we want to impress. It isn't a Theatrical Garden Party. If we weren't going to be so rushed during lunch-time I'd have asked you to go back and change."

Wasn't there some kind of answer she could make to that one? Why just stand here flushing like a fool?

"It seems to me your head's too full of this, that and the other, you know, Miss Clifford. Dressing yourself up, touching up your hair——"

The flush deepened almost to scarlet.

"But I don't, Miss Booth! Only a lemon in the rinsing-water!"

"Well, it's been remarked upon that it seems a bit lighter than usual lately, that's all. Don't forget you've got girls of twelve and thirteen in your charge."

Barrett, of course. Every cackling little scandal led back to Barrett. What about dashing along and having it out with her? She ran through in her mind a suitable chain of remarks. "I just looked in to tell you, Miss Barrett—— And while we're on the subject of personal appearances, Miss Barrett——" She tried to gather a little satisfaction from them. It was as far as she'd ever get.

"Well, aren't you going, Miss Clifford? There's nothing to keep you any longer, is there?"

Susan held open the door, but was waved off with a plump hand.

"No, thank you. I'm waiting for Miss Fowler."

Only one step outside was necessary to confirm the fact that Susan's class could now be heard all down the passage. There was no need to wonder for a second whose it was.

Miller, in the room next door to the entrance-hall, was writing spellings on the board. She was doing it with such a passion of vigour that her whole body shook with it. Miller was never to be seen anywhere but in her room after half-past eight, and never left it much before five in the afternoon. And a born teacher? Why, she would tell you herself that as a child she had taught the very flowers on the wallpaper.

Susan walked along the right-hand corridor, towards the room at the end. Past Barrett, taking her ease in her own Paradise of peace. "Betty Mason, if I've told you once, I've told you a hundred times——" Past Elliot, whose last arrivals were padding in almost on tiptoe.

Then in at her own door, shutting it behind her.

A turmoil of movement and noise, that racketed madly in her head. It quietened a little as she threaded her way to her desk.

"Sit down, all of you! Every one of you!"

That was bad, of course. Don't march in as though you're looking for trouble. Expect them to be orderly, and they will. How often had she been told that? Yes, and once or twice she had tried out the expectation theory. It hadn't got any further.

In any case, the frock was creating a good deal of interest, and not a little comment. There were smiles all over the room.

"Give out reading-books, for heaven's—— Here, you, Grace! You give them out!"

"I will, Miss Clifford!"

"Let me help her, Miss Clifford!"

"Me too, Miss Clifford!"

It was easier to let them, and quicker. And four

of them were already scrabbling together in the cupboard, anyway.

At the small back window, two more stood together with their heads slightly on one side.

"They've got one like it in 'Matilda's,' only green."

"No, it isn't, then! I know the one you mean. It's got little buttons all down the front!"

"Will you go and sit down, you two?"

Someone was making a fuss about a book with a broken cover. There was some snatching and tugging, and one of the piles cascaded on to the floor.

Susan sat quite still for a second, her arms outstretched at each side, her fingers gripping the edges of her desk. Then she leapt to her feet.

"Oh, pick them up quietly! No, it doesn't need a dozen of you. Let Grace do it. Sit down, all you others! Sit down!"

Suppose "she" happened to walk along the passage at this moment, and look in! Just suppose she did!

The door was opening and shutting continuously. The last-minute arrivals were coming in in a stream. Some of them half tripped over the fallen books. Some merely pretended to. Entering with zest into the general atmosphere, they plumped gaily into their seats. A desk banged here and there.

Susan went to the assistance of the exasperated Grace, and the pile was finally reassembled.

"Don't slam that door as you come in. It's noisy enough on its own, without being slammed. Connie, you stand there and see that it's shut quietly."

"Let me too, Miss Clifford!"

(Oh, heavens above!) "No, you sit still and read your book."

"But I've read this one all through, Miss Clifford."

"So have I, Miss Clifford. Can't we have another one? I'll give them out!"

"You sit——"

A sudden clanging of the bell out in the passage. The first peal of the day, and it never failed to startle her. Nine o'clock. Regulations now definitely required that the class must be completely silent.

The class was not completely silent. That bell had lost its warning for them during the last year. Susan opened the register, and announced the fact that she was waiting to call it. Thirty-eight names to be taken at a gallop if she wanted to avoid being late for prayers. She couldn't risk running foul of Miss Booth again, especially on a Monday morning. Miss Booth always felt her Monday mornings so badly.

It was quiet enough to start, anyway. It would *have* to be quiet enough. She had reached the end of the F's before the first halt. A desk had banged again.

Elliot's class, next door, began to file out while she was still labouring through the P's. Perhaps the others were out already too. She rushed on. Pales—Palmer—Pollock——

A pitched battle at the door could no longer be ignored. The vigilant Connie was trying to hold it against a couple of "lates"—Mary Hooper and May Barnes. It half opened, and they struggled through.

"I'll tell Miss Clifford! Miss Clifford——"

"We were in the passage when the bell went, Miss Clifford!"

"Oo, they *weren't*, Miss Clifford!"

"Will you sit down and let me finish this register?

I'll have to mark you late as you weren't in the room." (And I shall go stark *mad* if you don't shut up !)

Of course she should be making a few pointed remarks about the lateness in question. She should be having something to say regarding all this shuffling and whispering. But the last of Elliot's line had disappeared by now, and there was an air of terrible finality about the empty corridor.

The R's, S's and T's. Two V's and a W. Hurry—hurry—hurry ! Better that they should make a noise and get away with it, than keep Miss Booth waiting for prayers. Anything was better than that.

The foot of the column at last.

" Ready, now ? Stand up, and get into file."

A bit of pushing at the back of the end gangway, but no time to deal with it now. They were all waiting ! They must be !

" I can't find my hymn-book, Miss Clifford."

Susan's throat felt as dry as a bone.

" Look over someone else's, then."

" But I'll be standing in the front row, Miss Clifford, and Miss Booth'll see."

Miss Booth—Respected Authority.

" Couldn't I stand at the back to-day, Miss Clifford ? "

Any fuss over that wretched book would by no means involve merely the owner. There would be a lecture of general laxity, the first minute Susan was free to receive it. A couple of scared culprits. They'd have to hang together.

" Oh, stand where you like," she said, " and find it before to-morrow."

The passage was hopelessly quiet as she hurried

them all out. Elliot's room looked as if it had been deserted for about a month. So did Barrett's. Desk-flaps turned neatly up, and not so much as a stray wisp of paper on the floor.

Then the rest of the gathering was complete, all right ! There was no longer any need to wonder about that. For Miller and Fowler, on the other arm of the L, didn't have to shift their classes at all—only to pack them to one side. The folding back of two wood-and-glass partitions turned their two rooms into one. And it was in this that the state morning assembly was held.

Yes, everyone waiting to attention. Rows and rows of them, with a bare space carefully left for the black flock. Miss Booth on her little platform, behind her baize-covered table. Fowler and Miller against one wall, Elliot against another. Barrett rigid at the piano. All gazing fixedly ahead at nothing in particular. All in a paralysing silence.

They were rather like an illustration Susan had once seen in *The Sleeping Beauty*. The hall of the castle, with everyone suddenly " struck like it."

The spell was rapidly broken as she led the way in, however. Miss Booth swung her wrist up violently, to look at her watch. It was a far more spectacular gesture than merely glancing at the clock on the wall opposite her. And then, when the shambling had finally ceased,

" Are we ready to begin ? Hymn three hundred and thirty-six, class two. The others have already found it. If you please, Miss Barrett."

Barrett strummed the opening phrase, struck the note. They were off.

Susan sang mechanically. The beginning of another week. All over again. Barrett's queer technique at the piano, base hand slightly before the treble. Miller's thin nostrils doing their dilating trick. Miss Booth's voice rising flatly above everyone else's. And Fowler's shoulders, of course, with that dejected droop of theirs. She showed it so plainly, when she'd been given the "bird." Susan reckoned that she must come in for it almost as much as she herself did. Only, as against her own year's-worth, Fowler had no doubt been getting it, from one and another, for the last twenty or so.

After the prayers, Miss Booth's address. Mr. Hammond and Open Day. Open Day and Mr. Hammond. Not the gentleman who came to see them last year, of course. This was his son, paying his first official visit. He would be here about two. And if he said "Good afternoon" to them, what did they answer?

"Good afternoon, sir."

And if he spoke to them individually, and admired their work?

"Thank you, sir."

No hitch of any kind. The "John Hammond" on show. The "John Hammond" living up to its name and traditions.

And while she was on the subject of that— The voice solemnly dropped. There had been a complaint from a cleaner on Friday evening. A number of chalk drawings had been found in a place where drawings or marks of any kind were the height of vulgarity. She need not tell them *where*. Whichever girl or girls did it knew perfectly well where. It had come as a severe shock to her. Gratitude for a good education

didn't lie in defacing walls, and with chalk that was school property.

And now she was going to leave it to the culprit's Sense of Honour. If she came and owned up immediately after she left this room, she wouldn't be punished. Not this time, if she was honourable enough to confess. But she *would* be sent down at once to clean those walls.

The school was dismissed, to the strains of a flowery march by Barrett. Susan ushered her line back down the passage. But when she was more than half-way along, she noticed that a couple of them had fallen out, and were demurely waiting outside Miss Booth's door. Mary Hooper and May Barnes. With a tightening of her whole frame, she marched the rest in to their places.

She and Elliot took scripture in turns, their classes joining forces for it. It was Elliot's New Testament to-day, fortunately, but of course that only meant that it was her own Old Testament to-morrow. Over seventy of them.

Elliot's lot were trooping in already. She tried to get them settled, three at a desk, and standing round the back. It was the usual fiasco of a scramble. But Elliot, charging briskly through the doorway, was met in a trice with a deathly hush.

Susan took the rest of her composition books along to the staff-room, and sat down. For awhile she did nothing but look at the baize cloth on the table, vaguely tracing lines and circles over it. It was strange how these odd sandwiched patches of release were worse than anything. When she was in the thick of it she hadn't so much time to think. Now she had.

And she was thinking that in thirty-five minutes she had to go back for arithmetic.

There must have been some faint warning of all this at the back of her mind, when the question of " the future " was first discussed at her own school, over at Dover. " No, not teaching. I couldn't do it," she had told them. " I should hate it." And they had been short with her, rather more annoyed than amused. " How do you know ? You've never tried it ! "

She opened one of the books. Betty Allen, and a blot in the middle of the first page, the size of a half-penny. She couldn't have done *that* herself. Who sat next to her ? Ah, yes—Hilda Groves, and a still larger one on hers.

Just swept along with the rest of them, that was all—those who got as far as the Sixth Form. The one and only Career, dinned into them from all sides. " What ideas have *you* formed about the future, anyway ? None at all ? There you are, then ! "

And distressing " News of Old Girls " crept persistently into the School Magazine. So-and-So had secured a headship at Such-and-Such Road Infants' Section. Someone else had been transferred to " Junior Mixed " in London. Yet another had accepted an appointment in Jerusalem. Well, they could put her in if they liked. " Susan Clifford has been placed in charge of Class Two at the ' John Hammond ' Foundation, and is wishing she'd never been born."

Nearly time. She must get ready for the sound of that bell. If it caught her unawares, just outside in the passage there, it shook her up badly.

A moon-like blur, next to the frosted glass. Miss

Booth's face, looking through. A second later she had entered.

"Just a word with you, Miss Clifford. It was two of your girls responsible for those drawings."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Yes, I saw them waiting."

"I've had a frank talk with them. They're cleaning them off now."

Susan couldn't help wondering if she had really found the right ones. It must have been worth even the frank talk, to get out of scripture. It was rather surprising that there hadn't been a queue waiting to own up.

"Doing your work for you again, Miss Clifford."

"You mean *I* ought——"

"You know what I mean, don't you? Heaven knows I don't want a scene with you every minute of the day, any more than you do. But you've been here just on a year, and you're as callow as when you started. Where's your personality? Where's your backbone? You let a handful of children ride roughshod over you. They do as they like from Monday morning to Friday night."

Her voice became a little more tense.

"And *I'm* responsible here! I've got to throw open my school this afternoon to anyone who likes to walk in! I've got to receive Mr. Hammond and show him round! It's only a duty visit, of course, but he's got his say on the Board, if he ever cares to say it! Suppose there's any trouble from your quarter to-day? *I* had the engaging of you, didn't I?"

"I'm sorry," was all Susan could think of for the moment. It was like a "ratio" sum. As Mary Hooper and May Barnes were to her, so was she to

Miss Booth. And perhaps, for all they knew, so was Miss Booth going to be to Mr. Hammond.

"Just an irritation from one week's end to the next," Miss Booth went on. "From Monday morning——"

The sudden clanging of the bell in the passage, startling Susan nearly out of her wits. Arithmetic!

"—to Friday night," added Miss Booth.

Playtime duty with Miller, out in the playground. The sun shone hotly on to the asphalt, and the sky was very blue. It was a lovely day in the world beyond all this.

Singing next, Susan was thinking. "Where the Bee Sucks." Final practice.

Miller strolled beside her, exerting her authority in all directions. They mustn't screech. They mustn't run so fast. Put your hair tidy. Fetch that girl to me. I saw you! Go in to your classroom. Miller did so love to show off, and her discipline was the only thing she'd got to show off about.

No wonder they take it out of me, Susan mused.

At a quarter-past twelve, she drifted weakly into the staff-room. There was no one there yet except Fowler—a loping form at the window. She turned, and they exchanged a dismal smile. There was a Bond between them.

"Did you catch it this morning?" Susan asked.

"Did I catch it!" Fowler answered.

"Why don't you try being really early for once?"

"I do. I've tried all my life."

Susan joined her at the window. They gazed together over the chicken run, their elbows on the sill.

"How's things?" Fowler asked.

"Just the same. No personality——"

"No backbone," Fowler added.

"They just ride roughshod over me. They do as they like——"

"I know that one too. From Monday morning to Friday night."

There was a pause.

"If you've been through it too, why are you still at it?" Susan broke out. "Why couldn't you get away?"

Fowler pondered the matter in some surprise.

"I don't know—— When you're once in it, you stick. There wasn't much else I could do."

"Stick at it year after year? I can't! If I got the sack I'd have to leave anyway, wouldn't I? And I look like getting it pretty soon."

"You won't get the sack. No one ever gets the sack from this. Not when it comes to it."

"But I can't go on and on——"

"Oh, you will. It'll get better later. It gets better as you grow older."

Susan swallowed.

"How old?"

"Well, after say the first seven or eight years you sort of become part of the school. They take you for granted more. It doesn't occur to them so much to try to play you up. What I mean is, it's more a by-the-way with them. It's always worst right at the beginning—for our sort."

"Seven—or eight—years?"

"Oh, you'll shake down to it, if you give yourself time. You'll take it all as it comes. In any case"—

Fowler lowered her voice instinctively—"*she'll* be retiring in about another six, and a new one might be better. That's something for us both to look forward to."

Another thought suddenly struck her.

"Or you'll get married," she said.

"I don't know. Will I? And how many years to that, I wonder?"

Fowler turned on one elbow and changed the subject.

"That's a nice frock," she said. "Smart."

"Do you like it? Really?"

"Yes." Fowler moved across to the table and took out a cloth from the drawer. "I bought one that colour once. An evening frock it was, with little tiny sleeves. A bit off the shoulders here, and as tight as a drum here. Corn-coloured, they called it. Seems funny to be talking about it now."

She spread out the cloth, and put a packet of sandwiches and a bag of pears on the table.

"As a matter of fact—just between you and me—I got it because I had an idea some young man was going to ask me out. But it was my mistake, as it happened, and I never had a chance to wear the thing."

She added a cup and saucer, and a tea-infuser.

"So when it went out of fashion I gave it to my sister to cut up for a party frock for her kid. Kid! She's engaged now— Come on and eat your lunch and forget it all for a bit!"

CHAPTER II

THE MAN WHO MATTERED

GRAND assembly at a quarter-past two. They stood tensely waiting. Now was the time for Miss Booth to usher in her Guest Number One.

They went on waiting. The tenseness began to slacken a little. Feet shuffled, heads twisted, and Fowler yawned. A parent or two came and looked in through the glass in the door. They weren't due until half-past, but some were always bound to be too early.

Then Mr. Cope, the Vicar of St. Stephen's, came and looked through. A pink head with a dash of white hair at the sides. And after awhile Mr. Ridgewell, of the Board of Managers. Heavy-featured, with a wiry grey moustache. Councillor Ridgewell himself, of Ridgewell's Café, near the pier-head.

And at five and twenty past, Miss Booth sent in her monitress with a message. Classes one and two might as well sing their song, and then Barrett was to dismiss the school back to their rooms.

Susan sat down at the piano. They might as well sing it. She'd driven herself mad with it for over a month. And now, with everyone waiting to be moved on, in a general air of flatness, they might as well sing it.

"This'll take a bit of swallowing for her," observed

Barrett to Elliot, as they went out. " He's forgotten to come."

Twenty to three, in the room at the end. Thirty-eight children with their party manners worn threadbare, and a dozen mothers and three fathers out for the afternoon. Susan stood rigidly by the side of her desk.

" It's over a week since they were lost, miss. I don't buy her plimsoles just to have 'em lost. They must be somewhere."

" I'll see that there's a good search made, Mrs. Dyson."

" Grace's father's worried about her writing, miss. It's much worse since she's been up with you. He's got a lovely hand himself."

" I'll do what I can to improve it, Mrs. Davis."

Did they ever try to boss Barrett, or Elliot, or Miller ?

She had been warned that they might form in groups, and plunge off into endless gossip. There were three groups already.

" Connie, will you go round and pick up those books off the floor ? Oh, can't you *see* your garment's fallen down ? The country dancing must have begun in the playground by now, ladies, if you'd care to go and watch it."

The ladies seemed to prefer to stay where they were. The steady murmuring from the class was growing more pronounced. Grovelling under desks was becoming popular. Humped-up backs here, there and everywhere. But " Nothing in the nature of a scene in front of the parents, Miss Clifford." She tried to

quell them by a "Quieter, girls," "Sit up, girls." She tried signs and hand-flapping.

Another clutch of mothers, surging in through the door. Let them all come. Let Miss Booth come, and bring Mr. Ridgewell with her. Nothing could be much worse now. Except— Oh, no, surely the man with the beard wasn't coming in *here*?

He was, apparently. His head and shoulders drifted in in the wake of the mothers. There were sudden nudges, and the humped backs straightened. Vague titters gathered shape in every quarter. The gossipers turned their heads, some to smile, some to click their tongues in the direction of Susan.

He walked up to her desk, his soft black hat swinging in one hand, his smile diffident, his glance taking her in from tip to toe.

"Good afternoon," he said pleasantly. "Having a bit of a rough-house in here, aren't you?"

"Was there anyone special——" she began.

His gaze had wandered around.

"What's amusing them?" he asked. "Me?"

If I get through this day, Susan told herself, it's going to be the last one. It's going to be the last one.

She glared, round-eyed, all over the class.

"They're a bit excited. You know what it is— Rather a crowd in here— What is it you— Who——"

"Hot too, isn't it? Hot weather for teaching?"

"Oh, hot as— Was this the room you really wanted? I mean, everyone seems to be making for here, whether they want it or not, and Miss Booth'll be in, and——"

"Is that the one in the little room down there? I saw her as I came in. She was talking to the Vicar

and old Ridgewell. I thought I'd just breeze along here."

"But is your particular child——"

"My child?" His light eyebrows went up and his mouth crept into a grin that grew broader every second. "Good God! You don't think I look old enough to have one of these, do you?"

He leant a hand on her desk and laughed it off. A laugh that set the gossip-groups swinging round again. Susan regarded him with numb patience. Why does he have to turn himself loose in here? Why in *here*?

The class, meanwhile, was obligingly anxious to be in on any laughter that was going, whatever its cause. They chuckled and gurgled happily. Mary Hooper, at the back, even went so far as to push May Barnes off her seat. Susan's spine seemed to have turned to ice.

"I say, I beg your pardon," he said, as he sobered again. "I've been sort of taking it for granted you knew who I was. Daft of me. Why on earth should you? Anyway, I'm Hammond, you know. John Hammond."

Susan stared back at him, with the noise of the room buzzing in her head. Hammond, you know——

She spoke after awhile.

"How do you do, Mr. Hammond? Would you mind going back to Miss Booth's room and——"

"But she's talking. Hard at it. I thought I might as well——"

"Mr. Hammond, if you wouldn't mind——"

It was no good. Miss Booth was already bustling down the passage. She entered. The class quietened with a jerk. Even the gossipers looked sheepish.

"There's plenty more to see in the other rooms and the playground, ladies."

They began to file out. She stood eyeing Susan as they went. Then she came across.

"And you, Mr.—er— If you'd care to——"

"Hammond," he told her. "Miss Booth? Delighted to meet you, Miss Booth! You weren't here in the old days, were you? Oh, I must apologize for being late. I was delayed just at the last minute."

The noise still seemed to be buzzing in Susan's head. She watched two dabs of red appear in Miss Booth's plump cheeks, saw her sharp attempt at composure, heard her stilted politenesses as she led him away to the door, and finally had the benefit of another glance over her shoulder, before she passed through with him.

The class relaxed again. It wouldn't have mattered to Susan at that moment if they had burst into song. She pulled out her chair and sat down.

"She's very young——" Miss Booth faltered, outside. "Very young——"

"Yes," Hammond agreed. "Charming."

"Remember me, do you, Mr. Cope?" Hammond said. "I'm Johnny Hammond."

"Remember you? But fancy your asking me that! I'm only too flattered at your remembering *me*, Mr. Hammond!"

Hammond shook hands blithely. I must tell that one to Hunt, he thought.

"Of course, you were only a small boy when your father moved away," the Vicar went on. "But you haven't altered much in the face. Just a little more hirsute, that's all."

Miss Booth, watching Hammond's wide laugh, felt her cheeks growing cool again. She stood mustering her dignity. The world had stilled and calmed beneath her feet. Yes, easy enough to imagine that he hadn't altered much since he was last here. Already in her mind's eye she had that beard off, and had dressed him in a pair of knickerbockers.

"I ought to have come down before," he told them. "I ought to have come down with my father, when he paid his yearly visit to the school here. But you know how it is when you get knocking around."

Miss Booth and Mr. Cope nodded understandingly, as two who knew perfectly well how it was when you got knocking around.

"What with one thing and another——" Hammond said. "We lived in Paris for a bit, trying to paint, for instance, and before that——"

"Not—your father?" Miss Booth asked, bewildered.

"Oh, no. Hunt. A friend of mine. Anyway, now I'm here I'm making a proper holiday of it. Booked up for a fortnight at the 'Duke of Wellington.'"

"You're staying on?" The Vicar's face almost sparkled with delight. "I thought you'd be going straight back like your father used to. This is certainly more than we'd hoped for!"

Hammond smiled again, ran a hand over his hair and twirled his hat.

"Mr. Ridgewell!" called Miss Booth, as heavy steps went past the door. "Mr. Ridgewell!"

Mr. Ridgewell entered. Hammond spoke before he had his second foot in.

"I'm Johnny Hammond, Mr. Ridgewell? Remember me?"

More handshaking, more violent than ever.

"I'd given up hope, Mr. Hammond. As a matter of fact—I know Miss Booth won't mind me saying this—I really came along here to-day mainly for the pleasure of meeting you. I thought that before you left you might possibly do me the——"

"I'm not leaving straight away," Hammond put in. "I'm staying at the 'Duke of Wellington' for a fortnight."

Mr. Ridgewell's smile had by now embroiled his heavy features in such a state of turmoil that it seemed as though they could never be straightened out again.

"A *fortnight*? So we'll be seeing more of you? Well, this is really a most pleasant——"

"I was just saying to Mr. Hammond——" began the Vicar.

Miss Booth slipped out. Another matter had been left rather in mid-air. She could spend a minute or two on it now.

Susan saw her coming. She stood up, desperately determined to get her word in first.

"Miss Booth, I didn't know who he was!"

"Miss Clifford, if you've any idea what this room sounded and looked like as I——"

"Yes, but I didn't know who he was! I was expecting you to bring him in, if he came at all. I didn't think he was coming!"

"You think I'd have brought him in here? Your room would have been a joke if it hadn't been a nightmare! And he walks into the thick of it!"

"Yes, but I didn't know—I'd have hedged him off somehow——"

"Listen. Stop twisting that handkerchief about or

the class will see you. It's got to be quiet from now on. Take a hold on yourself and get that properly into your head. Tell yourself—it's got to be quiet from now on."

"Yes."

"If any parents come in again, keep them on the move."

"Yes."

"The girls have books to read, plenty to do? I can't stay here any longer myself. We can go into all this later. I'd like you to wait behind at the end of the afternoon."

A brief harangue to the class and she was off. Susan walked aimlessly across to the cupboard, avoiding the interested eyes ahead of her. She knew in advance the talk that would run round the dressing-rooms later on. She had overheard it once before. "Cliff's been getting it in the neck again."

Miss Booth found Mr. Cope and Mr. Ridgewell standing in the doorway of her room, watching Hammond, who was half-way down the farther passage, admiring a photograph on the wall ("Miss Clifford and Netball Team"). She stood with them, eyeing him too.

"He's a change—a—er— He's quite different from his father, isn't he?" murmured Mr. Cope.

"Quite different," said Miss Booth.

"A little strange, perhaps, but a particularly amiable-looking young man. A pleasure to talk to him."

"A real pleasure," said Mr. Ridgewell.

Mothers began to trickle into Susan's room again. They sidled up and down the gangways for awhile, then settled into groups.

She was bracing herself for an attack on them when Hammond swung in at the door, glancing half guiltily over one shoulder.

" Just making a tour round on my own," he said. " Been over to the boys' section with Mr. Ridgewell, but I thought I'd slip back here again. Hot, isn't it ? Or did I say that before ? "

" Yes, it is," said Susan, gripping her desk. How could she put it ? " I should make a tour by all means, Mr. Hammond."

" Miss Clifford's the name, isn't it ? I saw you in that sports group outside. D'you know, with you in that short gym. dress thing, I had quite a job to pick you out from the others, first of all."

" Oh ? "

" Yes. It's good of you, though. Very good. I like that gym. dress."

" Have you seen the other four classrooms ? " Susan inquired.

" Not yet, but I'll do the whole lot in good time. I'm enjoying this afternoon immensely."

" Are you ? "

" Yes. You know—the Man who Matters. The Big Noise. It's quite a new one on me. I'm making the most I can of it."

" Mr. Hammond, you've been in here twice, and you say you haven't started on the others yet. Wouldn't you——"

" There's heaps of time. Though I was pretty late in arriving, wasn't I ? And I couldn't very well explain why, either. As a matter of fact, it was all over a shirt I had to buy, to change into. I was walking in at the very gate before I remembered it."

Is he mad or am I? Susan wondered. He was laughing again. The class watched him and joined in.

"Mr. Hammond, if Miss Booth comes in——"

"Couldn't very well have gone into all that with her, could I?"

"She must be about somewhere— Would you care to go and see—or do your tour round the other rooms——"

He ran a hand down his face, regarding her thoughtfully.

"Perhaps I'm being over-sensitive," he said. "But are you asking me in so many words to clear out?"

"If you would, please! Miss Booth— There was a row in here last time, and they're none too quiet now!"

"Oh, I see. I'm sorry. I'll go and head her off." He moved at once to the door again, pausing there to stand aside a moment. Three more mothers were coming through.

Inspection of the other four rooms. No chance of any distressing incident in these. Miss Booth leading the way as though with a flourish of trumpets. Mr. Cope and Mr. Ridgewell, beaming attendants in the rear. Barrett and Elliot and Miller and Fowler only staring their fill when they knew they were not observed. The children stiff in their seats. "Good afternoon, sir," and "Thank you, sir."

His little train following him through the Infants' section, then through the Boys' again. Quite a heady experience, all of it, to the Man who Mattered.

The school finally dismissed. Mr. Cope and Mr.

Ridgewell shaking hands again long and heartily. They would see more of him ? They *must* see more of him, much more of him, during his stay.

Of course, he told them. Delighted. No stand-offishness on the part of the Big Noise.

And then Miss Booth asking him into her room again. And after a little skirmishing she took the bull by the horns.

" About that upset in the end classroom, Mr. Hammond. I'm sure I needn't ask you not to make any unpleasantness over it."

" Unpleasantness ? " he said.

" I'm still very busy training Miss Clifford. The Managers left her appointment to me. She's my particular responsibility. She *could* do the job properly, and she *will*. But meanwhile any hint from you to the rest of the Board— Well, they've always had the fullest confidence in me, Mr. Hammond. If you said anything they might misunderstand—if you led them to think I was in any real difficulty— It just makes for slight unpleasantness, that's all."

" The kids making a row ? " he said. " Not a word, if that's what you mean."

" Everything just—went off splendidly, didn't it ? "

" Everything went off splendidly," he assured her.

" Thank you, Mr. Hammond. That's very kind and friendly of you. I knew I could get you to see my point. I knew it almost the moment I met you. And now, as you're going, I'll slip along to Miss Clifford's room."

" Oh, she's still here ? " he asked, interested.

" Yes, she's waiting. We're to have a talk together."

" Then if you're in anything of a hurry yourself,

I could go along and talk to her instead. Yes, I think——"

"I'm not in any hurry, thank you. But I know you want to be off. We've all appreciated your visit very much. It's been a great pleasure. I'm very happy to have met the great-grandson of the Founder. More happy than I could tell you. And now, no more delaying you. Good afternoon, Mr. Hammond."

She was holding out a plump hand. He took it ruefully. It almost seemed as if the Man who Mattered were being shown the door.

He would like to have the car waiting outside, to have driven off in style. It made a bit of difference to the holiday, too, doing without it. Why Hunt couldn't keep his hands off it for a fortnight——

Something in what he'd said, though. Stewing up in London in the heat——

He set off towards the front. Past the Victoria Park. A couple of hoydens of twelve or so were playing by the fountain. They seemed to be splashing water at each other, with side darts and high screeches. He recognized them vaguely. Yes, weren't they in *her* classroom, sitting together somewhere near the back?

There was a sudden pause in the screeching as he went by. But as he reached the end of the railing, another sound just carried, dimly, to his ears.

"Ba—a—a—a."

He took three more strides before any significance dawned upon him. Then he spun round. They had their backs to him, and were drinking placidly from the mugs.

He went on. Nothing to do with him, of course.

The Park was alive with children, all making peculiar rows of their own. But a faint flush spread over his face. He passed a hand round his mantled chin and wondered again.

He walked along the parade, trying to shake the thought off. To the left was the beach, shelving down in switchback ridges to the sea. You could get a clean dive at high water. Wonderful swimming. Wonderful place. Most of the old names still on the boatmen's huts. There wasn't much changed, really, after all these years. And the air— No air on earth to beat it.

To the right was a long sweep of grass, running half the length of the front. He strolled across, towards the "Duke of Wellington." He might as well change and have a dip.

The "Duke" stood on a corner. Double-fronted and bay-windowed, with a small private door round at the side. And outside this door, a small boy in baggy knickers over a bathing costume was playing with a spade and a pail of water. Sid Sillick's grandson, on a month's visit.

He raised bright black eyes and saw Hammond warily approaching. He jerked himself upright and flourished the spade. He dipped it in the water and sent a little shower of drops gaily through the air.

Hammond was side-stepping them as Sid lumbered through the open door in his shirt-sleeves.

"Be careful with that now, Cyril! Mind Mr. Hammond's trousers!"

"It's all right. It didn't touch them," said Hammond. "Only water, anyway."

"He took a fancy to you when you came in at mid-

day, Mr. Hammond," Sid told him as they went indoors, with Cyril following literally on their heels. " And he doesn't take fancies easily, either."

" Doesn't he ? That's fine."

" It's what I always say. Children *know*, don't they ? They just know."

" Do they ? Yes, I suppose they do."

Hammond passed on to the stairs with a nod and a smile for each of them. Know what ? he thought, half uneasily, as he went up.

Waiting for his meal, just before seven. Sprawled on his back on the sofa, in his front living-room, eyeing the pier-glass and the china dogs and thinking about Hunt. Staring up at the ceiling and thinking about Susan. Sid Sillick clattered up and entered.

" Vicar of St. Stephen's. Mr. Cope," he said. " Looked in for a chat. Down below, jibbing about like a blooming racehorse. What's he want to come in for, if he's so scared of the sight of a few beer-handles ? "

Hammond rose to his feet with a laugh, picking up a fallen cushion and slinging it across to a chair.

" I'll tell you what for," he answered. " Merely because Johnny Hammond happens to be staying here. Johnny Hammond himself."

Sid laughed too, a wide cackle that showed every gap in his teeth.

" I'll show him up, then. ' Johnny Hammond himself ! ' You're a card, you are, Mr. Hammond ! "

He kept on chuckling as he went to the door.

" Johnny Hammond him——"

"Yes," said Hammond. "But it's not quite such a joke as all that, is it?"

Mr. Cope was more at ease in Hammond's sitting-room. He put his hat down and settled himself in the arm-chair, and spoke of the fine weather lasting, and what a good view there was from the window, and wasn't that a P. and O. passing by on the horizon? Then,

"Has Mr. Ridgewell called yet, by any chance?" he said.

"No, not yet." Hammond was rather surprised, rather gratified. "Is he coming?"

"I daresay, yes. I didn't want to clash with him. I thought I'd slip along at the earliest possible moment."

He leaned forward, his smile very ingratiating. Hammond smiled broadly back.

"I'm going to take advantage of the Cloth and speak out," said Mr. Cope. "It's not for myself, after all. I've come frankly begging, Mr. Hammond."

Hammond's smile wilted at the corners a little, but he kept it going.

"Yes?" he said.

"You know, of course, that your great-grandfather gave us our bell. He was very generous in many directions, I've heard. I've always wanted to get another Hammond on one of my subscription lists. And the moment I saw you I thought, 'Here he is! He's going to help'!"

"What do you— What——" began Hammond.

"It's the Organ Fund. For repairs, you know. It needs what I call a good fillip. I admit I've hardly

given you time to breathe, Mr. Hammond, but I was thinking to myself this afternoon—after I'd met you—what a fine thing it would be if I could have a donation from you the very day you arrived. What an example to the others!"

Hammond was abstractedly watching a game of rounders on the green.

"Well, I *could* make it a tenner, if you put it like that," he said. "For old associations, and what not. I'll let you have a cheque."

"Ten? Oh—thank you—but— Now come, Mr. Hammond. While you're about it, can't I persuade you— I'm a good reader of faces, and I know I'm not mistaken in yours."

"I don't suppose you are." Hammond brought his eyes back. "But I think you've got me wrong somewhere. Er—I wasn't left as much by my father as you—perhaps imagine. Money does dwindle sometimes, doesn't it, from one hand to another, as it were? And he made a good many other bequests, too. Perfect right to do as he liked, of course. Anyway, I've started a shop with my little lot, with a friend of mine. Got to do something. Perhaps later on——"

"I—see. I'd no idea." Mr. Cope's face had fallen appreciably. "Yes, I certainly *had* imagined——" He paused.

"I think the old boy felt that any more wouldn't be good for me, or something," Hammond went on.

He didn't enter into the wording of that will. He made no mention of the biting ". . . to my son John, in the hope that he will be permitted to use a little of it for his own convenience."

"Oh, well——" said Mr. Cope. "It's a pity, though.

A great pity. You look so— Still, that's the way of the world. I hope your venture will be a success. And of course I'm deeply grateful for your ten pounds."

Hammond groped in an inner pocket.

"May I lend you my fountain pen?" Mr. Cope offered.

"Oh, thanks." Hammond opened out his cheque-book and began to write.

"And I hope I'll be seeing a good deal more of you during your stay," the Vicar added.

What, still? Hammond reflected, as he tore out the cheque.

Mr. Ridgewell looked in soon after he had finished his meal. Mrs. Sillick was in the last stages of clearing the table when steps sounded on the stairs, and his smiling bunch of features edged round the door.

"I took the liberty——" he began diffidently. "Mr. Sillick thought it would be all right. 'Come to see Johnny Hammond himself?' he said. He seemed to think there was some kind of joke about it."

"I daresay he did," observed Hammond. "Come in and sit down, Mr. Ridgewell. Nice of you to look me up so soon."

Mrs. Sillick nodded a greeting and shook the cloth out of the window and went off and shut the door. They sat down together, both a shade rigidly.

"Are you quite comfortable here?" Mr. Ridgewell wanted to know. "A bit rough-and-ready, aren't they?"

"Oh, it suits me fine, thanks."

"I was wondering— Of course, I didn't know you were staying on, until you mentioned it to-day,

or I'd have asked you before. Frankly, Mr. Hammond, I was wondering if I could persuade you to be my guest for the rest of your holiday."

"I say, that's awfully——"

"I'd think it an honour. I don't want you to feel at all lonely here. It would be a pleasure to me to help you enjoy yourself. On the other hand, when you wanted any privacy——"

"That's awfully good of you—awfully good!" Hammond was overwhelmed. "But these Sillicks—well, they remember me, you know. I'm afraid I can't walk out on them now."

"Don't you think a small settlement, or something of that nature? I can assure you I'd be——"

"I'm extremely grateful, Mr. Ridgewell, but I'm really afraid I can't leave here."

"Pity I didn't know before," mourned Mr. Ridgewell. "But you'll come along and see me? I'd like to show you around. I've spread out a bit since you were here as a boy. The place is growing and you've got to grow with it."

"And other concerns cropping up too, I notice," Hammond observed tactlessly. "That big one in the high street, for instance."

Mr. Ridgewell ceased to smile. He leaned forward.

"I'm not afraid of competition, Mr. Hammond. No one's going to beat me in the catering line. Of course, a little more expansion, perhaps— But I've got my plans in mind. Extension at the side, for a start. There's a shop site going. I could make a good dining-room of it. Might even get in a waiter or two. And then a lunch-delivery service."

Hammond began to swing one foot, dispiritedly.

"Think of all the people in the outlying parts, who take over houses for a spell and don't want to bother with cooking," said Mr. Ridgewell. "It only needs a few splashy motor vans, and a bit more increase of staff. A little extra outlay to start with, but in next to no time it'ud double itself twice over. Twice over!"

Hammond nodded slowly, and went on swinging his foot. A good thing he hadn't accepted that invitation. And no wonder Cope had wanted to get his visit in first.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It all sounds fine, but—if you're looking for a backer, I can't manage it. I'd better let you know right away."

Mr. Ridgewell reddened. His voice came explosively.

"But I wasn't putting it on any personal footing! I assure you I——" It had quietened a little, after a brief pause. "Still, as you've struck this note yourself, why not call in while you're here, anyway, and let me——"

"Sorry," Hammond said again. "I just haven't got it to spare."

"Well, there it is," observed Mr. Ridgewell, as he finally rose to go. "That's always the way of it. Yes, I'll admit I've been thinking of you. I've been thinking we could do some great things together. Almost the first moment we met to-day——"

"Yes," said Hammond. "Yes, I know."

He went back to his chair, when he was alone, and sat swinging his foot again, his shoulders hunched forward. After awhile he got up and began to mooch

about the room. Then suddenly he veered over to the pier-glass, and studied his face long and thoughtfully in it.

Sid came upstairs and found him standing by the window.

"Oh, I thought p'raps you'd gone out," he said.

"No," Hammond answered. "Perhaps I will. I don't know——"

"Well——" Sid tittered a little. "There's someone to see you."

Hammond swung round to stare at him.

"What? Not *another*?"

"A young lady. I thought I'd ask you before I let her up. Seems to me if you engaged someone to stand down by the door and——"

"A young lady?"

"Yes. Her name's Clifford, she says."

The colour deepened in Hammond's cheeks. The vague depression cleared away. The world went gay again, in the space of a second and a half.

"Large brown eyes?"

"Proper saucers."

"What on earth can she— Oh yes, tell her to come up! Go on, quick, in case she changes her mind and clears off again!"

CHAPTER III

THE WILLING HANDS

HE heard her coming up. He stood watching the door. There was a brief halt outside. Then Susan appeared, a wide, nervous gaze under a little felt hat.

Hammond gave a bow, flourishing an arm jubilantly.

"Come in, Miss Clifford! What an honour for the 'Duke of Wellington' and Johnny Hammond!" He began to laugh. "Have you suddenly decided to start a private school of your own, and want me to back it for you?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, staring.

"Oh, just trying to be funny. I've been entertaining a couple of old acquaintances." He drew nearer to her, his face serious again. "Nothing wrong, is there? Come and sit down."

He led her across to the large arm-chair. She sat down and plucked at the cord around the edge of the seat. He stood leaning against the table, watching her.

"Miss Booth was talking to me after school," she said. "She happened to mention among other things —among quite a lot of other things—that you were staying on here."

Hammond's eyes were still full of her. Hers were lowered. She kept on plucking at the cord. Then she looked up.

"I want you to help me," she said.

"Yes? How?"

"At least, I wanted to talk to you. I dashed out from home this evening thinking it was the only thing left to do—come and talk to you about it. They can't understand. They just can't understand how awful it is. No one understands except Fowler, and even she's never been through it like this! She can't have, or she wouldn't still be at it!"

She paused, only to rush on more quickly than ever.

"I tried to tell them I couldn't go on with it—felt I couldn't even turn up there to-morrow—and they all seemed to think I was just setting out to spoil their meal for them. They said the same old things about putting my shoulder to the wheel, and other people could do it and like it and so could I. And they all helped to push me into it in the beginning! I never wanted to do it! I never *wanted* to!"

Her voice cracked across ominously. Hammond jerked himself forward, then stood rather wildly at a loss. Finally he dashed across to the sofa for a couple of cushions, and stacked them behind her.

"Lean back on those," he said. "Make yourself comfortable."

"Oh, thank you——"

"Don't worry. Don't upset yourself——" His hand went out and almost closed over hers, on the chair-arm. Then he drew it back and plunged both into his pockets. "What are you upsetting yourself *about*, anyway? This teaching business?"

"What do you think——" she began.

"Yes, of course. I didn't guess you were feeling like this. You can't go on if you're worried about it. You mustn't be worried. You're not serving a sentence there, are you? Why not just cut loose—write a note to the old trout to-night, saying you're not turning up any more."

Susan's head reared up from its cushion again.

"But I can't. That's just it. There's the question of the month's notice and everything. When I set out this evening feeling as if I couldn't go on another day, I thought I'd ask you to tackle it for me. I thought you could get the notice waived, or something."

"Why, of course!" Hammond was one great willingness to oblige.

"Would it be possible?"

"I don't know, but I'd do it."

"Or if I could at least feel that any time from now till the end of the term I could walk out and let you settle it for me?"

"Yes, surely! I'd do anything!"

"Oh, thank you!" She put her head back on the cushion again.

Hammond looked down at her, at her young rounded face and her tanned throat and her slender form. Her coat had fallen apart, carelessly. Her legs were twined around each other. He became aware that he was standing far too close to her, and that the blood had begun to drum a little in his head.

He moved back to the table. Then he groped in his pocket for his cigarette-case.

"Will you smoke?" he said.

"No, thanks. Not just now."

"You don't mind if I do?"

"Of course not."

He lit up, inhaling deeply once or twice. He spoke again.

"It's been worse than usual to-day? What's she been saying to you?"

"Oh, everything. I suppose it's my fault all right. I must try her to death. But I was scared all the afternoon. Ever since you came. Not of you. I don't mean that. Not after I'd seen you."

He shook his head, with a faint smile.

"But scared of her *through* you," she went on. "Scared of her finding anything else wrong, and knowing you'd seen it. Anything might have happened, any time. I can't get hold of this discipline business. It seems you've either got it or you haven't. I thought it'ud get better as I went on, but so far it's only got worse."

There was silence again. Her eyes roved through the window, over the green. Now they came back to him, to meet his fixed gaze.

"You won't tell her I've told you all this, will you? I mean, this is all unofficial, isn't it? It was supposed to be kept from you. That was the whole idea."

"Yes, I see. No, I won't tell her, then."

"Only you being—like you are—it's such a relief to be able to talk." She sat forward, her elbows on her knees. "I don't know what's the matter with me. She says it's no personality, no backbone. Anyway, people walk over me. I can see them doing it, and I can't stop them. She does. Barrett does, and Miller.

The children do. They even do at home. I must be that sort of person, that's all."

Hammond was horrified.

"But—good heavens, you can't talk like this! Don't let them! Leave the school in any case. Give in your month's notice, so that you have to leave at the end of it anyway, whether you walk out before or not!"

"Yes, I'd thought of that—oh, I don't know. Now I've sort of simmered down a bit—perhaps I'll stick it a little longer, and see what happens. There'd be an upset at home, you see. After keeping me at a training college for a couple of years, they'd have a lot to say about it. Whichever way you look at it you're up against something else."

She gave a half-smile, for the first time since she had entered the room.

"I knew I could chew it over with you without your passing anything on. As soon as I met you I felt that—well, you know——"

"Yes," he said. "I know."

"Something in your face. All good-natured and easy-going."

"Oh, yes? You're the first one to put it in so many words."

She smiled again. Finally she rose to her feet.

"You've been very decent about it all. I'm awfully grateful." She re-settled her hat and coat. "I hope you don't think me too mad, the way I've been carrying on——"

Hammond had drawn himself up from the table. As she reached him, he put out a hand, and closed it upon her arm.

"Don't go," he said.

"Oh, but——" She paused, looking up at him. The pause spun itself out. The formal excuse she was going to make had faded away. For his was no formal pressing. With the touch of that hand, the whole atmosphere of the room had suddenly changed.

He dropped the hand again. He made an attempt at a laugh, not altogether successful.

"Or can't we do something—go out somewhere, now you're here?"

It seemed to matter quite a lot to him. He was hanging on for her answer. She came out of her brief shock of surprise and eyed him afresh. Yes, every second that she waited was a second of suspense. Slowly, her mind began to bask in the thought of it.

"But—it's too late, isn't it?" she said at length. She looked at her watch. "It's nearly a quarter to nine."

"Well, anyway—don't go."

She ran her toe round a pattern in the rug, then glanced up at him again.

"All right," she said, a little breathlessly.

He shepherded her back to her chair. He looked around for another cushion, and found one. She almost said, "Please don't bother. I don't really need it." But she stopped herself in time. She let him settle it carefully behind her.

"Any good offering you a spot to drink?" he said diffidently. "I think Sid's got some Benedictine tucked away somewhere, if you'd care for it."

"Oh, not for me, thanks. I couldn't trouble you,

and I don't really know what it is, anyway." She had almost said that too. But not quite. "Oh—thank you," she said. "Just a very little, perhaps."

She waited, round-eyed, while he dashed to fetch it. Already she was beginning to feel like the Divine Lady.

She took the tiny liqueur glass from him, and curiously had a good sip at it. She was appalled at herself for the sudden cough that followed.

"I say, don't drink it if you don't like it," he told her, concerned. "No need to be polite, or anything."

She composed herself. Their eyes met again. They both laughed, together.

"I do like it," she said. But she wasn't thinking so much of the Benedictine. That was the least heady part of any of it.

He pulled his chair closer.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Susan."

"Is it really?" He was intrigued.

"And I seem to remember that yours is John."

"Yes, only it's always been Johnny, for some reason or other. But if you don't fancy it, call me anything you like. If you'd care to, that is. That is, if I may—may I——" He paused.

She was sipping at her glass again.

"Ever since I was about fourteen," she said ruminatively, "I've been trying to get them to call me Sue. I think it's got more of an air than Susan. But they never would. They said it was silly."

"I'd love to call you Sue," he told her.

He was leaning forward now, his hands linked be-

tween his knees. She was finding it hard to avoid his eyes. The whole situation was so bewilderingly new. She felt very alone with him.

She let her gaze drop to those hands. Large, pleasant-looking hands. The kind of hands, probably, that went around carrying other people's parcels, and opening doors to let everyone else through. She glanced up towards that short point of beard again. Difficult to keep her attention off that for long. The chin it covered was quite massive. But then that was usually the way, outside the novelette. The man of iron had next to nothing in the way of a lower jawbone. The genial "after you" sort had one like this.

She had met his eyes once more, inevitably. They hadn't moved from her. She felt herself flushing a little. He took her empty glass and began to speak again, with a jerk.

"Wish we could have gone for a run round. Nuisance about the car. I knew I'd want it. I had to leave it behind with Hunt. A friend of mine. He's got a half share in it."

He thought for a moment.

"But I could hire one, of course—if you'd care to come out in it."

He'd hire one, if she'd care to go out in it. Just like that.

He was getting anxious again. He twirled the glass between his hands until she thought he was going to drop it.

"Would you? A spin round after the day's work? Something for me to look forward to. Wouldn't you—Sue?"

He was like a dog waiting with its ears well back.

She smiled. And no one at the " John Hammond " or the house in Adelaide Road had seen that smile before. It was a favour in itself.

" Thank you. Yes, I'd like to," she said.

" I say, that's—— When ? To-morrow ? We could run out somewhere to eat. Make it to-morrow ! "

" Well, thank you, I——" She paused. The graciousness evaporated again. She spread her hands helplessly. " Oh, I can't ! Not to-morrow. They're doing an arithmetic test in the morning, and I'll have to mark them in the evening ! "

" Can't I do them in the afternoon ? "

" You ? " she said, after a dazed silence.

" Why not ? It's my school as well, isn't it ? And we needn't let them know."

She made another onslaught on the chair cord, and tried to think it out, and gave it up.

" Oh—would you *really* ? I could give you the answers, and show you how to make an R ! "

" That'ud be charming of you ! I'll meet you at the end of the morning and take 'em over."

" Or I could just drop them in. I live quite near."

" And then come in again to tea, and we'll start straight off ? I say, that'll be great ! "

" Yes. Yes, it will ! "

" And if there's ever anything else in the marking line that you think I could do, just turn it over."

" Oh, thank you," she said. " Yes, thank you."

The bewilderment was dying away. She sat looking thoughtfully over the top of his head for a moment. Nearing the end of the term, with holidays in the air and disorder at its worst. " Give them plenty to do,"

Miss Booth said. Plenty to do meant an eternity of marking. But if they wrote out passages by heart, it only meant underlining mistakes and putting a total at the end. He wouldn't mind doing it. No, he wouldn't mind.

Her chin was slightly raised. Hammond sat looking at the curve of that tanned throat again. He was wondering what would happen if he seized her out of that chair and tipped her chin back still farther and kissed it. The whole length of it.

He tried to pull his thoughts into line. He took the glass over to the table and made a business of setting it down, next to his own. They'd been talking about the school again, or something. Arithmetic, or something. Oh, yes—to-morrow. Never mind about the look of her, for a bit. This was just a friendly visit, to talk over her problems. Take her out, make her enjoy herself. Help her along any way that crops up. They'd walk over her, would they?

She smiled up at him as he strolled back to the window.

"It's so strange to see anyone as young as you are with a beard," she told him.

He fingered it, smiling too.

"The idea started with Hunt, as a matter of fact. We run a shop together, up in Baker Street. Pictures and pottery and stuff. He thought it'ud lend a bit of atmosphere, so in the end I had a pop at it. Bit Bloomsbury, I suppose, but I keep it well under control, and I've got quite attached to it now."

Hunt again. She found herself beginning vaguely to resent Hunt.

"Er——" Hammond's hand came to a sudden halt.

His voice had an edge of anxiety. "Don't you like it?"

Hunt, forsooth!

"No, not really," she said.

"Oh, lord! I'm sorry about that!" He looked it, too. "I haven't got much of a face without it, you know. And it was sort of part of the shop."

He seemed to be suing for a little quarter in the matter. But she remained silent, though she was still smiling.

He ran a hand over it again, as though in a loving farewell.

"Yes, I'm sorry," he said. "Well, no good talking on about it, I suppose."

Another brief pause. Then,

"All right. I'll shave it off in the morning."

It was dark when they finally left. He walked back with her to Adelaide Road. The velour curtains of the large bedroom window were already drawn. Mrs. Clifford liked her nine hours' sleep.

Hammond pulled off his hat and stood bareheaded at the gate. He held out his hand, and when she put hers in it he kept hold of it. His fingers were warm and strong.

"You won't let them make you unhappy tomorrow?" he said.

"I'll try not to," she answered.

"If there's anything else you fancy doing in the evening, let me know, won't you? You think it over during the day."

"Oh—thank you."

"Or anything I can do for you in any way at all——"

"Yes—thank you——"

The moon shone on his face. The point of beard was a twinkling gold. He ought to have had rings in his ears, she thought, and a bright handkerchief bound round his head, and a cutlass swung from his waist. No, a ruffle and a slim sword, and a cloak to spread out under her feet.

"Good-bye till to-morrow, then," he said. "Good-bye, Sue."

"Good-bye—Johnny."

He smiled at that. He drew her hand suddenly up to his mouth and kissed it.

"Good-bye," he said.

She paused to watch him striding off, as she went up to the house. Then she let herself in. David was out in the scullery, clattering a saucepan.

"Oh, Susan!" he called, relieved. "Glad you've come in. Mother's just sung down for some malted milk."

Hammond went up to the front, and walked aimlessly on. The night was lovelier than any night had ever been before. There was magic in the flat houses with their silvered roofs, and in the brisk splash of the waves. And in his heart a sharp tenderness was turning and turning like a knife.

Susan went to bed to dream. Semi-conscious dreams, with just a film of drowsiness over them. She lay stretched in power like a queen on her couch. Beyond the squirrel-cage of Booths and Barretts, and racketing noise and hot humiliations. Beyond the despair of trying to make them understand—they who could never understand. She had been lifted there by a

pair of willing, eager hands. And she said to the hands, "Please do this. Please bring me that." And they did it. And they brought it. Anything. Every time.

CHAPTER IV

TROUBLE WITH INKWELLS AND A SWIM BY MOONLIGHT

HAMMOND stuck it until eleven the next morning. Then after two solid hours of wondering how she was managing to-day, he walked in at the school gate and through the doorway of "Girls."

He halted in the passage, rather at a loss suddenly. Then he knocked at Miss Booth's door. She opened it, to stare at his smooth face in surprise.

"Oh——" she said after a moment. "Oh, good morning, Mr. Hammond. You've——"

"Yes, shaved it off," he told her. "I've just looked in for a—look round. You know, taking an interest——"

She ushered him into the room and shut the door. He seemed only a boy without that beard!

"That's nice," she said, humouring him a little. "But you wouldn't want to disturb the classes at work? Not just now, perhaps? Are you having a pleasant holiday?"

He answered her vaguely. Even if he did get a pass into Sue's room, of course, it wouldn't help. Nothing he could do here would help. It was just difficult to keep away, that was all. Perhaps she was going along all right this morning. He couldn't stick here talking to the Booth, anyway. Perhaps he could just stroll

along to the end before he went, and wave through her door. She faced the door.

"It's strange you should have called in this morning," Miss Booth said. "I did want to speak to you, as it happened, about the Prizegiving."

"Oh, yes?" Blast the Prizegiving.

"Even if you aren't going to stay over for it, I was thinking how I'd like to tell the Managers that you'd offered a needlework prize. It would be such a compliment—well, a compliment to me, really—after you'd seen their work yesterday. I've always made a speciality of needlework."

"Oh, rather. I thought it was fine." Get this over, and amble along to the end, one mass of nonchalance——

"I *had* begun to hope for a sewing-machine."

"What?" broke out Hammond. He drew in a breath and smiled. "I beg your pardon. I'm afraid my mind was straying a bit. It does sometimes. A—er—sewing-machine?"

"I thought I could persuade you. I saw Mr. Cope in his front garden as I passed this morning——"

"Oh, I see."

"And charity begins at home, doesn't it?" Miss Booth was heavily roguish. "And if you didn't want to neglect the boys—well, anything would do to even it up. A tool-box, say."

A good old-fashioned holiday, thought Hammond. A trip to Egypt would have been cheaper. Still——

A door shut noisily, at the far end. Miss Booth quivered a little.

"Well, I suppose it's up to me to do something of the kind," Hammond said.

"Excuse me," Miss Booth answered. She opened the door. "What are you doing up there, you girls?"

A double set of footsteps came along the passage.

"They're collecting the inkwells ready for nature study drawing, Miss Booth, and we upset ours, but it wasn't on purpose, Miss Booth. We got sent out of the room."

"Collecting *inkwells*?"

"Miss Clifford said they'd better get the ink out of the way, Miss Booth."

Hammond stiffened suddenly, inside the room.

"Well, go back to your desks."

"Miss Clifford sent us——"

"Miss Clifford herself knows I don't have anyone standing outside in passages. Go back and say——"

There was a dim crash in the distance.

"What's that? What on earth are they doing?"

"Collecting the inkwells, Miss Booth."

"You go back—I'll come with you—Mr. Hammond, if you can imagine my——" Her face shot into the room, only to be snatched back as the end door opened and fresh footsteps ran down the passage. Susan this time, with flaming cheeks and wild eyes.

"Miss Booth, they've been collecting the inkwells, and one of them's dropped her end of the tray!"

She was plainly desperate.

"She says someone jogged her arm as she went by, or something! I had to fetch you. The class has got worked up! They just won't quieten properly!"

"Are you aware," breathed Miss Booth into her face, "that Mr. Hammond——"

But Hammond was already out there.

"What's wrong, Sue?" His voice boomed down

each arm of the L. "What's wrong? Upsetting yourself over a few inkwells? Chuck the whole damn lot out of the window!"

Barrett's door had opened.

Susan stood staring back at him. Then she forced herself to glance at Miss Booth. But she got no sign from that quarter. Miss Booth seemed to be letting the world spin round her as it willed for a moment or so.

"A few flaming inkwells!" Hammond was taking those inkwells hard. "What's it matter? What does anything matter? Sticking here day after day worrying your guts out over it all! I came in to see if you were all right, and here you are—still worrying your guts out!"

The noise from the end room was swelling gaily. Miss Booth, suddenly reimbued with the power of motion, made off towards it. A child from Miller's room came out, all eyes, and caught up the brass bell and clanged it deafeningly for the last lesson of the morning.

"God in Heaven!" muttered Hammond.

He went on after a moment.

"Here—come in here! Get out of it all——"

He took her wrist and drew her along to the staff-room door.

"You're mad!" Susan gasped, pulling against him, her body bent forward in an arc. "I've got to go back!"

"Let her settle 'em. This is the John Hammond school, isn't it? And who's John Hammond? You're not going back all het-up like this. Come in here and get over it."

He got her into the staff-room and shut the door. And when she tried to open it he took her hands away and held them. And when she looked up at him he caught her closer, against his chest, and put his face next to hers, and held her still.

"It's all right——" he said. "Don't worry. It's all right——"

She relaxed suddenly, her eyes closed.

"Oh, it's been awful again! They've been working up for something like this all the morning."

"Come out with me now. Just walk out and leave. You needn't even tell 'em. I'll do the telling."

"Your skin feels so smooth. So you *did* have it off, then?"

"I'd have my ears off if you wanted me to. Come on. Where's your hat and coat?"

A couple of classes were changing rooms, outside. The passage was alive with moving forms. But moving very slowly, and as close as possible to the frosted glass.

Susan began to pull away again.

"They can see us! They can see quite enough, anyhow! Take your hands off me, Johnny, if you've got any sense left!"

"What's it matter? If you're leaving now——"

"I can't! How can I just walk out? Take your ——"

"Didn't we say that any time you wanted to——"

"You'll have me *ordered* out in a second! If I'm pitched out now or pitch myself out, it's all the same! I'd have to go home and tell them. They'd have a fit if they heard of this! The only way you can help

is by coming to your senses and trying to smooth it over ! ''

Miss Booth was outside now. She rattled the door-handle in feverish warning, and ordered the classes along. Finally, when the change-over was completed and the passage was quiet, she entered.

Susan stood by the window, very still and stiff. Hammond was in front of the fireplace, his hands in his pockets, staring at the floor.

None of them spoke for a moment. Miss Booth was still in the grip of a stupefied amazement. But it was she who broke that silence.

" Your class is quite quiet now, Miss Clifford. All ready and waiting for you.''

Hammond looked across at Susan, and she looked back at him. He set about the smoothing over.

" We met last night, you know,'' he told Miss Booth. " We spent some time—chatting together, and what not, and became very good friends.''

" Yes, I gathered——'' she answered mechanically. " I gathered that some kind of acquaintanceship——''

" That was why I was a bit—well, I mean—only young once, aren't you ? ''

" Not in here, Mr. Hammond, if you don't mind. Not that kind of thing here. Surely you can understand——''

" Yes. I'm sorry. I didn't notice they could see through that glass, anyway. If you'll accept my apologies for everything—I brought her in here and kept her in here, and I apologize to both of you.''

Miss Booth nodded vaguely.

" There wasn't anything else you wanted to take an interest in ? ''

"Oh, no, thanks. No. I'll be off, then." He moved across to the door, but turned back. "She'll be all right now, will she?"

"Yes—yes—good-bye, Mr. Hammond."

There was the matter of the car, now. Hammond thought of it again suddenly, and paused to make a few rather harassed calculations on the back of an envelope with a stub of pencil. But in spite of those calculations he drove up to the "Duke of Wellington" finally at twenty past twelve in a drop-head coupé that would have turned Hunt pale with envy. If he could splash out on organ repairs and sewing-machines and tool-boxes, he wasn't going to stint his expenses on *her*.

Sid greeted him in the passage with a packet of papers. Quite a fat packet, with sums all over them. And a blue pencil, and a slip with eight answers down one side and a large specimen R on the other.

"She left 'em five minutes ago," he told him. "Said you knew all about it."

"Oh, yes." Hammond took them and conned the answers sagely, and practised an airy R on the wall with his finger.

"School-teacher, eh?" observed Sid. "Let yourself in for something over that lot, haven't you?"

"Not a bit." Hammond glanced at him. "I'm going to enjoy it."

He walked towards the stairs. Sid followed him, thoughtfully.

"Going to do them on the beach this afternoon, by any chance?" he wanted to know.

Hammond was half-way up.

"Yes," he said as he went on. Then he paused, and turned. "Why? Come on, I'll buy it. Why?"

"I was only thinking about young Cyril." Sid looked at him sideways. "Mum and I can't always be dodging over there, and he does like the water. 'Course, he never gets much more than his big toe wet, but with the beach so steep it just wants someone to be on the spot, that's all."

Hammond went to rasp at his beard, and found it wasn't there.

"It'ud be such a treat for him to go over with you," Sid said. "He calls you Uncle Hammond already. You know what little kids are. Doesn't take much to please 'em. He won't bother you. Not for a minute. But you know what it is—he comes down here with his little bathing-costume and his little pail, and you've only got to say, 'What about a bathe, Cyril?' to see his little face——"

"All right," Hammond cut in. "Don't go on trying to break my heart, Sid. Put him on his little bathing-costume and give him his little pail, and I'll hold his little hand all the way over." He turned and went on. "Blast his little eyes!" he added to himself.

It was rather a gruelling afternoon, what with the friskiness of both Cyril and the test-papers. But soon after four he whisked them all back again. And when Susan arrived he was waiting for her, his heart thudding away under the check flannel shirt.

They stood looking at each other for a moment in some embarrassment, after their first greetings. The scene of the morning was still before them. But his

awkwardness was greater than hers. It had meant more to him. He had been feeling her face against his ever since.

"I've done that arithmetic," he ventured.

"Oh, have you finished it? You've been very good."

"I liked doing it." And all the afternoon he had wanted to lie by the sea and dream about her.

> Oh my God! the down,
> The soft young down of her, the brown,
> The brown of her—her eyes, her hair, her hair!

He couldn't get the words out of his mind.

She pulled off her hat and gave her head a little shake, but a twist still lingered on her forehead. He spoke with his eyes on it.

"Was everything all right—after I left?"

"In a way, but what on earth possessed you——"

"She didn't go for you, did she?"

"No, she just stares. She's like someone with a gag on, wanting to burst."

"Let her keep it on. Did anyone else see us?"

"Two classes and Barrett and Fowler."

"Does it matter? Did they say anything?"

"No." (She didn't pass on Fowler's comment—"Going it a bit, weren't you? Any luck? Any hopes?") "But of course everyone there has heard by now. They've all started to stare."

"Does it matter?" he said again. "Is there anything I can do?"

"No. No, I don't know that it matters much, really. My own lot, for instance—while they're doing their staring, they're a bit quieter."

" Do 'em good," he said, with returning ease. " Do 'em all good. Teach 'em they can't walk over you with Johnny Hammond around. Now sit down and make yourself comfortable, and I'll give a yell for that tea."

He was so anxious for her to like the car. He was so anxious to please her. It would have been amusing, she thought, if it hadn't been rather touching too.

And at home they were still wondering where she was, no doubt. On her way back from school she had made a brief phone call, to say she wouldn't be in until late. And she had hung up during her mother's " But what——"

Off for the run, with Hammond half dizzy with elation. He felt that he wanted to keep handling her and moving her about, like a child with a doll. He wished it were cool enough to wrap a rug round her, so that he could tuck it in all the way, and take hold of her hands and put them outside (or inside, whichever she preferred). He wanted to turn up the brim of her little hat, and then turn it down again, to see which way he liked better. He wanted to pull the hat off altogether, and let his fingers meet under her hair, feel it twisting over them——

He encountered a wide, brown gaze. He stared back a moment as a sudden tremor seemed to rip its way across his very brain. Then he blinked sharply and looked at the road again.

Monday, Tuesday, he thought. Two days, and there's a fortnight of it. Don't spoil it. Don't spoil it by getting out of hand to-night. She's so young—

two days—yesterday morning I'd never heard of her. I must be going off my head——

Susan looked back at the road too. At home they were wondering, of course. All hands to the pump, and falling over each other's feet in the scullery. And she might have had those test-papers still waiting for her. And now she was off for the evening on the springiest rubber seat she had ever sat on. And the hands on that wheel were pleasant, kindly hands, eager to do what she told them. But his eyes—— They had looked strange, a moment ago. Would he try to kiss her, or something, before the evening was through? Did they always try to do that, when they took you out? And would she have to let him? Could she say to the hands then, "Please don't," and would they obey that too?

Cocktails, overlooking the front at Folkestone. Hammond tipped his down and laughed at her for the way she sipped at hers. Laughed with a little light flickering in his eyes. She laughed too, with her head slightly back, and her teeth gleaming against the brown of her skin. He stopped quite suddenly. His hand half strayed across the table, then clamped itself over the edge.

"If I had another shot at it, I'd try pouring *mine* down," she said.

He was looking across at her fixedly. Then after a moment he moved his hand.

"What was that?" he asked. "I'm afraid I didn't —— What were you saying?"

"I was hinting, rather forwardly, for another one."

He got a grip on the matter.

"Doesn't want more than half an eye to see you're not used to 'em," he told her. "It might go to your head."

"Oh, but it couldn't——"

She seemed a bit disappointed, and he couldn't stand that. But he ordered her, *sotto voce*, a plain vermouth, and hoped she wouldn't notice much difference. "Put a cherry in it," he murmured.

Got to look after her. She was very young. Got to look after her.

He went blithe again during the meal. He began to talk of Hunt, and Paris.

"We were both stuck on this art business even while we were at school," he said. "And when we were turned loose on the world, Hunt thought we might as well take a course and get on with it. We had a studio over there just off the river, and——"

"But why in Paris?"

"Why not? As good as anywhere else, wasn't it?"

"Oh, yes—yes."

"Hunt sold four pictures in the year, at round about thirty bob each," he went on. "And I nearly sold a couple. After that we packed up. But the shop's making headway. A mad idea to start with, I suppose, but——"

"Hunt's idea?" she inquired.

"Yes, he's full of 'em," he told her easily.

She brooded over Hunt for a minute. But only a minute. She leaned forward thoughtfully with her chin on her fist.

"I've never done any mad things in all my life," she said. "I've never even thought of—thinking about

them. The maddest idea I've ever got in my head is to want to go for a swim in the moonlight. And I've never even been able to do that."

He stared at her in surprise. He laughed.

"Only that? Well, let's go to-night. We'll have shaken our food down by the time the moon's out."

She laughed again too. How easy it was to laugh this evening!

"And call in at home for my costume? I'd like to see their faces!"

"Well, borrow Mabel's."

"Mabel's?"

"Serves in the bar at the 'Duke of Wellington.' She's got a blue one. Quite nice, too. I've seen it hanging out of her window."

"And where on earth should we go?" She was still laughing.

"Sandwich Bay, say. A good run over, for a start. We'd have to wait for the moon, anyway. And no one there. You could change under your coat, or behind something, but it wouldn't matter. It'ud be dark, anyway."

She shook her head.

"No," she said. "It's a mad idea all right, but I'm not as mad as you are."

"You don't want to go after all?"

"No."

"Phew!" He flourished a handkerchief extravagantly over his forehead. "You know, I've been wondering what on earth was coming next. Played the host pretty well, didn't I? Give me a swim in the morning any day, or the afternoon at a pinch. But at night—Lord above, no!"

She sat eyeing him. She watched him getting on quite heartily with his fruit tart. And people went and lived in Paris, trying to paint, and then came back and launched off into strange shops. Beards and bright flannel shirts were a mere nothing to them. And she'd never even had her swim in the moonlight.

"All the same," she said, after a pause, "I suppose Mabel wouldn't *mind* lending her costume if we wanted her to?"

They drew up at the back of the beach at Sandwich Bay, and the moonlight shuddered over the sea towards them.

"Sing out when you're ready," Hammond said, and threw her a towel and faded away along the sand.

But he could see her when she called, because she was running down to the sea. He sprang up and ran after her, and she turned her face over her shoulder and laughed, and all the blood in his body seemed suddenly to surge upwards.

She ran straight into the water. How terrible it would have been at that moment if she had bobbed and squealed in the surf. No, she ran straight on until she could plunge. He plunged after her. She was swimming strongly. She must be using a pretty good crawl. He set his pace by hers. He didn't want to get ahead. He wanted to follow her.

She swung her head up and trod water a moment.

"Well, I've done it," she said. "Bit cold after all, isn't it?"

Cold? Was it cold? Never in his life had he had a swim like this before.

She struck back, and he followed her. He was

hoping she would begin to run again when she reached the shore, so that he could run after her. The ecstasy of running after her, over the soft sand——

She did. She began to run even through the surf, pulling off Mabel's tight black cap and shaking her hair free. He ran too. When they left the water behind them he let himself catch her up. He clutched at one of her hands, and the sudden jerk sent her pitching forward on her face.

He was on his knees beside her. He put his arms round her wet shoulders and drew her up against his chest.

"You're not hurt?" he breathed. "You're not hurt?"

"No——" She put up a hand, and it met the thundering of his heart. "No, of course not—please ——"

He drew her closer, and she struggled a little. For a second he was in danger of letting that struggling go to his head. He had only to hold her face still——

Then he slackened his grasp. She drew free and sat up. They looked at each other in the dimness.

She spoke after a moment. She was a little breathless.

"It's been jolly, hasn't it, all of it? It was nice of you to bring me."

Jolly. A good word for him to take hold of. Jolly. A swim ought to be quite sexless. "Look at all the young people enjoying themselves in the water." That sort of thing. Jolly.

He stood up, and helped her to her feet.

"You'd better make a quick change," he said. "Don't go catching cold."

Something swirled in and out at the edge of the waves like a limp streak of seaweed. Now it lay stranded for a moment on the sand. Hammond stared at it, pounced on it, wrung it out and held it up. It was a flimsy piece of blue voile.

"Looks as if you didn't weight your things down with anything," he observed in a voice of rather forced calm. "Here's your frock."

She ran across and took it from him, and flapped it about helplessly.

"Oh, why didn't I leave it under my coat with the rest? I might have known this breeze—— What shall I do?"

"Button your coat up and forget it. I'm taking you right to your door, aren't I?"

"Yes, but it's inside the door that matters. If they saw me walking in holding that—— Wait a bit, though. They ought to have gone up by the time I get there. Perhaps I can slip in."

But when they arrived outside the house in Adelaide Road, they found the light in the front living-room still going merrily, and no sign yet of any appearing above.

"Let's drive around and come back," Hammond suggested.

"No, I'd better make a dash for it. I'll go straight in and up."

Hammond handed her out and gave the sodden voile another wring in the gutter. A young man walked past and swivelled round to look at them again.

"Care to mind your own business?" Hammond asked him pleasantly.

"He lives at the end," Susan whispered in some

distress, as the young man hurried on. "I know him by sight."

"Don't like his manners, anyway," commented Hammond.

The front door of the house had now opened, and Mr. Clifford was walking down the path, carefully and a little self-consciously smoothing his band of hair.

Hammond made a wild attempt to stuff the dress into his pocket. Susan snatched it away and tucked it under her coat.

"Well, my dear?" said Mr. Clifford. "I thought it was you. And—Mr. Hammond?"

What on earth——? thought Susan. How on earth——?

Hammond held out a wet hand, brought it back and dabbed it against his trousers and held it out again.

"Hammond it is," he said. "Mr. Clifford? Delighted, sir!"

"I wanted to make sure Susan was going to ask you in, Mr. Hammond. My wife and I——"

"Oh, thank you, but—er——"

"Surely, just a few minutes?"

"Er——"

Susan, the dress fairly well under control, took pity on him and gave a faint nod. The slipping upstairs might be easier now, anyway.

"Thank you," he said to Mr. Clifford. "Thank you."

They went up the path and through the doorway, to be met by Mrs. Clifford's smile in the hall. Mrs. Clifford, for some reason or other, was wearing her black crêpe-de-chine and her crystal beads.

She kept her smile at full strength as she greeted Hammond. Then she seized upon Susan's hands.

"Why didn't you tell us?" she said.

There was a wet thud on the linoleum. Susan caught the frock up again, and Hammond tore at once into speech.

"I'm afraid I suggested a bathe. Terribly hot—— We went with some friends of mine, who have a place on the beach down Sandwich way. Sue got her dress a bit wet, flipping her costume about——"

Did it sound as mad to them as it did to him? They had all gone very red, suddenly. Mr. Clifford smoothed his hair again, rather violently. After a moment Mrs. Clifford laughed with her mouth shut, and rounded it off with a prolonged tongue-clicking.

And Susan, waiting for the explosion, found that it didn't appear to be coming.

"Let's all settle down and have a little chat," suggested Mrs. Clifford. "We'll see you in a minute, then—dear?" she added to Susan.

David was presented, in the front room. He ran a surprised eye over Hammond and thought, "Good heavens!" And Hammond, genially shaking hands with him, was thinking, "My God!"

Susan joined the group, still very red-faced but circumspect once more. The senior Clifford settled Hammond in a comfortable chair, near the light. And then they began to talk to him.

Miss Booth had called. Now, now, there was no need to look guilty over that. They'd been young themselves not so long ago. But naturally Miss Booth was worried. She'd wondered if they knew, and if it were all open and above-board. These suspicious

spinsters—well, she'd thought there might be something casual and unpleasant about it. She had the good name of the school to think of. But of course they'd reassured her.

"Oh, thanks," said Hammond.

They'd reassured her. The situation was a little delicate, but there need be no more of that side of it. He didn't want Susan to be made conspicuous. No more scenes at the school. No more night bathing from—er—friends' houses. But if he would come and see her as often as he liked in her own home——

Oh, wait a bit! ran Susan's dazed thoughts. Wait a bit——

"Thanks very much," said Hammond.

They hadn't finished yet. There was a good deal more they wanted to learn about him. His circumstances, his prospects. Miss Booth had been difficult to question, at a first meeting. But not so Hammond himself. He leant back in his chair and cheerfully let them pump him dry.

And after awhile Mr. Clifford began to see himself talking to clients through the grille at the bank.

"You know the John Hammond school, of course? The present John Hammond is my son-in-law. Fine old family. Pleasant young man, too. A bit Bohemian, but—pleasant. Easy to get on with. Public school and University, of course. They turn out good types, don't they? Not left as much money as he ought to have been, of course, but he seems to have expectations from an uncle. And running a very flourishing concern in Baker Street, London. The West End, of course. Dealing in art of some kind. It wanted a tidy bit of capital to start it. There's another partner

at the moment, but I don't know if that'll last. He may buy him out. The sort of life my boy David would have liked——"

And Mrs. Clifford rehearsed on her own.

"My girlie's married! Yes, married at twenty-two! Mrs. John Hammond. You know the name? I thought you would. It all started so quickly, but the real thing always does, doesn't it? Yes, they're living in London. I love London. I'm not a real provincial at all, you know. No, I was born and bred there. And now I'll be able to go up quite a lot. Quite a lot——"

"You'll be coming again, then?" they said, as he rose to go. "Any evening. We should be delighted." And Susan was thrust forward to see him off.

CHAPTER V

GRAND FINALE AT THE "JOHN HAMMOND"

HAMMOND called in at the school again next morning. He had to. They had both forgotten the test papers, and he suddenly saw them at the back of the sideboard after breakfast. He cloaked them in a newspaper and tucked them under his arm.

Susan saw him skulking in the passage when they dismissed from prayers. She looked back rather wildly over her shoulder, while he made even wilder gesticulations towards the newspaper, and formed soundless words, and described figures in the air. The class fell over its feet looking back at him too. He stopped helplessly as others poured after them. Barrett came up and asked him if there were anything she could do for him.

"No, thanks," he said. "Oh—yes. Yes, of course. I just looked in for a word with Miss Booth."

He talked to Miss Booth about the sewing-machine. She interviewed him with her attention obviously roving beyond him, in some apprehension. She gave him five minutes.

He hung about irresolutely just outside the porch after she had dismissed him. He hung about so long that Miller came to her window to see what it was that was causing the continual bobbing-up of her end block. He almost ran away at that sudden sight of Miller's

face. But he kept his head, swept off his hat, and stood his ground.

He drifted into the hall again. He pounced suddenly on a small girl who was walking back from the cloak-room.

"Here!" he said. "I've just found these papers on top of a cupboard here. Must have been put there and forgotten for the minute. They belong to Class Two. Would you take 'em along?"

"Yes, sir." She took them and smiled at him. Nice little kid, he thought.

Then she came closer.

"Can't you find Miss Clifford, sir?" she whispered. "She's not taking scripture to-day. She's in the teachers' room." She nodded. "*All alone*," she said.

Hammond began his visits to the Cliffords. There seemed nothing else for it. Paying a courtly compliment or two to Mrs., talking business with Mr., endeavouring to be all-boys-together with David. They received him in state, trying not to show any evidence of their growing strain. (A couple of neighbours had already inquired whether Susan had caught a cold after Tuesday night, and had the sea-water spoilt her dress?)

He sat and smiled at them—that amiable smile of his that almost outdid Mrs. Clifford's. Susan wondered sometimes how much longer he was going to keep it up. She let most of the conversation roll unheeded over her head, just watching him from her corner of the room. Watching and puzzling, half exultant one moment, half scared the next. Bewildered at the

slipping ground under her feet, then thinking of those willing, serving hands——

And Hammond was running over the soft sand after her. Smiling and talking mechanically, but running all the while over the soft sand with Susan running before him. And he caught her by the shoulders this time, and they fell down together, in a close heap. And he took her wet brown arms and held her still, with her face turned up to his. And he brought his mouth down upon hers and kept it there, until the Cliffords' voices merged and receded dimly in his ears.

He was as good as his word over that marking of hers. Each afternoon he took a packet of papers across to the beach with him, and laboured his way through all the Isaiahs, or "Our England is a Garden," or "There's a breathless hush in the Close to-night." Thirty-eight times through each. (It was as much as he could do, when he went to bed at night, to stop himself from reciting them madly over and over.)

And minding Cyril at the same time had now become a matter of course. Seeing that Cyril didn't slip out of his depth, and dashing down at intervals when he looked like doing it. Letting Cyril bury him up to the waist in stones. ("Play up, play up, and play the game!" Eighteen mistakes in one sheet, and where's that ruddy pencil hidden itself now, and oh, Lord, he's gone off to the sea again!) Watching him with a hunted eye when he came staggering back with pailfuls of water, or bearing obscene-looking jelly-fish. And then grinning at him good-humouredly as he plumped himself down with an oft-repeated, "Wish I could live with you always, Uncle-ammond."

" All the same," he mused, " when Sid asks me to start putting him to bed, or taking a turn in the bar, the answer will really have to be a definite no."

The holiday was flying by. The first week had gone. He was beginning to count the days rather desperately now. Only seven left—only six—— Why did he have to spend his evenings in that ghastly front room of the Cliffords', or in the Cliffords' garden, when he wanted to be away alone with Susan ? Away from the town, from the sound and sight of everyone, just sitting looking at her, and trying not to think that in a few days he would be leaving her behind.

He did manage it one night, half-way through that second week. He took her for another run. They went inland to Canterbury, and back in the gathering dusk. They spoke little until the homeward journey. And then suddenly Hammond cut into a long silence.

" What's it been like to-day ? "

" Pretty awful."

" It always is ? "

" Yes, always."

" And aren't you going to do anything about it, or let me ? "

" I don't know—— I keep hoping it'll get better. If I left, there doesn't seem much else I could do—— Oh, no, that sounds like Fowler ! I mustn't start talking like Fowler ! "

" You snap out of it, and think about it afterwards."

She smiled at him, but it was rather a dispirited effort.

" I couldn't expect them to keep me at home," she said. " And I suppose I couldn't go into just anything,

with Dad so keen on his dignity. Not in Clayle itself, anyway. He'd simply hate that. But perhaps I'll find a decent opening soon, and I'll snap out of it then, all right."

He drove on for another mile.

" Just this week and three days of next—and that'll be the end of the term, won't it ? " he said.

" Yes, with a final upheaval of a Prizegiving, that'll be the end of the term."

" And then your holiday. Anything might have happened by the time that's over."

" I don't quite see what, but I'll try to think so too."

A further stretch of silence.

" I shan't be here when you finally break up," Hammond said. " I'll be leaving on Sunday."

Leaving—yes, of course, he had to be leaving sooner or later.

" I'd stay longer if I had half a chance," he said. " But I haven't. Hunt's taking his own spell from next week-end. He'll be gone by the time I get back, as it is."

No more of the cheerful smile or the willing hands——

" I'm sorry," she told him. " Oh, I'm sorry you're going ! "

She saw his head turn, but she did not meet his eyes. Flushing a little now, she looked straight ahead of her.

The car was slackening. Hammond pulled in to the side, and braked to a standstill. He cut off the engine. There was no sound but the rustling of the long row of poplars that skirted the lane.

" You don't mind, just for a minute ? " he muttered. " We're almost into the town, and I—— What did you mean, when you said that ? "

She sat very still, her hands curved over the edge of her seat. His left one was just touching her right. His other was still gripping the wheel.

"Only that you've been kind to me," she said, rather breathlessly. "That you've helped me along——"

His eyes were fixed upon her. A riot of words were jumbling together in his head.

"You're going to miss me, then?"

"Yes, of course. We've been—good friends, haven't we?"

"If I came down again—— There'll be the week-ends. This holiday of yours—will you be going off somewhere else for it?"

"No, we'll just be staying here."

"Will you? Then if I came down at week-ends—— Would you mind that? Would you like me to?"

She glanced up at him, and away.

"Yes, I'd like to see you again sometimes, if *you'd* like to. I shouldn't want to feel I was sort of saying good-bye for good——"

"Do you mean——" His hand closed suddenly over hers. It was hard and tense. "You know what *I* mean, don't you? I suppose I ought to be going slow, and paving the way, but I can't keep that up. I've got to go and leave you here, and get through next week without you. And then just see you at the end of it with that family of yours—— Oh, it'll be wonderful, coming down again. I don't mean anything like that. But you know, by now, don't you? You know why I—want to come?"

She made no answer in the pause that followed. Her hand was as rigid as his.

"Kind to you!" he went on, half under his breath.

"No one in their senses could help being kind to you. You've seen more in it than that, haven't you? I'm thinking about you every minute of the day, and I lie awake half the night thinking about you. All the time I'm wanting to catch hold of you, and—kiss you like hell and say mad things to you, and try to tell you that everything's changed for me since I met you, and that if I thought I was never going to see you again there'd be nothing left——"

He broke off. He seemed to have become aware of the stiffness of that hand within his grasp, for he took it up between both of his, holding it more loosely. And his voice was steadier when he finally spoke again.

"I've let myself rather run away, haven't I? I didn't mean to, when we set out this evening. But you said you wanted me to come, and you said you'd miss me—— That's enough for me to build on, isn't it?"

She made as though to draw her hand free. Then she let it stay where it was.

"You're asking me if I feel the same way about you, aren't you?" She brought the words out rapidly. She was afraid that her own voice would falter. "But I don't—quite. Not like that. You'll leave a big gap when you go, and I'll feel almost lost without you now, but I ought to tell you I don't—I haven't——"

The hands moved, around hers.

"You haven't fallen head over heels in love with me?" he said after a long moment. "Well, I could hardly expect that, could I?"

"I've never been in love at all, with anyone. If I started, it ought to be with you, I know. But you can't sort of force it——"

She looked up at him again in some distress. His

eyes were slightly strained, still, but he smiled down at her slowly.

"Just a week and a bit," he said. "And you're saying you'll miss me. That's more than I dared hope for."

"As long as you understand——"

"I understand. You've only just met me, haven't you? And you're pretty young—— Don't think about it yet if you don't want to. I'll be coming down at week-ends and we'll slip away from the family as often as we can, and have a good time. And perhaps later on—we'll talk about this again."

"But suppose even then I can't say——"

"I'll have to go on waiting."

His smile lingered, faintly. His grip tightened for a second, and then he put her hand down again.

"And meanwhile, this helpfulness of mine that you seem so struck on—I don't see where it comes in myself, but—if I can do any more of it, you'll bear me in mind, won't you? Any time, wherever I am?"

"But I've let you do too much already, considering——"

"I've done nothing at all. Try me out one day and see what I *can* do. You won't forget—if I can be of any use ever?"

"Thank you. No, I won't forget, then."

There was silence again, and the rustling of the poplars. They both remembered those poplars in days that were to come.

Then Hammond leaned forward and turned a switch. A moment later the engine purred into life. They moved on. They reached the outskirts of Clayle. They drove through, turned the corner into Adelaide

Road, pulled up outside the Clifford house. And neither of them had spoken another word.

Mrs. Clifford came into Susan's room that night, and sat on the bed watching her as she brushed her hair in front of the dressing-table.

"He seemed very keen to get you away on your own this evening, that young man," she remarked.

"Yes. I don't know. Did he?" Susan increased the pace of her brush-strokes. "I think he just wanted a run."

"Susan, this isn't the time to be vague and up in the air. You know Dad and I are rather anxious."

Yes, Dad and she had been especially anxious ever since they had had the note from Miss Booth, early in the week. A mother had been up to see Miller, and had asked, in passing, which one of them it was, exactly, that Mr. Hammond was "after." The youngest one, she supposed. Miller had been very upset about it, and Miss Booth had thought they ought to know. The outside world was beginning its "talk."

"You'll be saying soon you can't tell whether he's serious or not," Mrs. Clifford resumed. "Come along now, Susan! You must have some idea. A girl always knows how a man feels about her. He's a queer kind of customer, one way and another, and if he's planning just to go off again at the end of the week and leave all this in the air—one of these holiday flirtations —well, Dad'll have to speak to him. He'd be easy enough to deal with, that's one thing."

"Dad needn't bother," Susan said, whirling the brush. "He wants to come down at week-ends."

"He *does*? What did he say?"

"Just that he'd like to come down at week-ends."

"Susan, has he *said* anything?"

"Well—yes. He sort of—well, he's quite serious, anyway."

"He's actually come to the point? He's actually told you that he——"

"Yes."

Mrs. Clifford spoke from the full extent of her smile.

"And you just walk in and say nothing at all, when you've got news like that! Why, when Dad proposed to me, I could have shouted it from the housetops! Why didn't you tell us? It's nothing to be *shy* about! It would have looked so odd to him if we hadn't mentioned it before he left—hadn't even told him we were glad!"

Susan had been brushing her hair up the wrong way. She swung round, her head like a distressed daffy-down-dilly.

"There's nothing to be glad about yet," she said. "I don't really feel the same as he does."

The smile snapped to.

"What?" said Mrs. Clifford blankly.

"Not that way."

"But you—— Susan, put that brush down, will you? Come over here. Come and sit down here. You've seen him every day since he came. You let him make that exhibition of you at the school. Those wretched mothers are beginning their gossip, and several of the neighbours too. And now you calmly say——"

"Calm! I haven't been calm for months—years!"

"You say you don't feel 'that way'! Why not? What's the matter with him? He's young and fresh-looking, and very pleasant in his manner. You

couldn't ask for much more. If you're waiting for one of these Antony-and-Cleopatra affairs, you'll wait for the rest of your life!"

Mrs. Clifford glanced sideways at her, as though the mere suggestion that Susan was waiting for any such thing were a shade indelicate.

"You don't know him well enough, that's all," she said. "In a few weeks you'll feel different."

"But you can't force it——"

"Then *why* have you been going about with him, letting him come here——"

"Because he treats me as no one's ever treated me before."

Mrs. Clifford eyed her again.

"Well, there you are, then!" she said. "I don't know quite what you mean, but—there you are! By the time you know him better you'll feel all right about it. Dad and I can have a word with him before he goes——"

"No. Oh, no! Don't talk as though it's anything definite!"

"And don't *you* talk like a child, Susan. He's attached to you and you're attached to him, and you've let him make you very conspicuous. What with Dad's position at the bank, to say nothing of yours at the school——"

Susan jerked up to her feet and took hold of the hair-brush again.

"Need we go into it all now?" she said. "I've had a rotten day, and I'm tired. And it's my turn for scripture to-morrow and I'm dreading it. They're awful, towards the end of the term! Couldn't I be quiet for a bit, just before I go to bed?"

Mrs. Clifford rose too, hitching her dressing-wrap around her with some dignity.

" Oh, you can be as quiet as you like. But you might bear in mind——"

" Yes, I'll bear it all in mind. Good night, Mother."

The door shut, after a moment, with a smart click. Then Mr. Clifford came upstairs and went into the room next door, and Mrs. Clifford's voice began again, full of intonations, all up and down the scale.

It was some time before Susan went to sleep. And when she did she moved restlessly for awhile, dreaming of that double scripture class, and in particular of Mary Hooper and May Barnes. But then the night became cooler, and she slept more at ease. And she dreamt about the willing hands.

On the Friday it was—that grand finale of a scene at the " John Hammond." The day had begun much the same as other days, except that Susan had found a number of tiny pieces of paper strewn confetti-wise over her desk, and the constant opening and shutting of the door and dropping of books seemed to racket through her head a little more than usual.

Then the morning was cut through by a rehearsal of the Prizegiving programme, and Class Two somehow managed to make a mix-up of its allotted positions, and the assembly had to wait while she tried to get them straightened out. And in the afternoon the thing was run through again, because of the numerous hitches, and Miss Booth's strident voice sent little shivers down Susan's spine. And finally, restive and excited, the class clumped back for the last lesson of the day—Painting.

It had been bad enough on other occasions, but not as bad as this. Never before had as many as six water-pots been overturned, to the accompaniment of smothered giggles or hot expostulations.

"She did it on purpose, Miss Clifford! It's gone all through my dress!"

"It's gone on to the seat, Miss Clifford, just where I sit."

"Can I get the duster and wipe it up, Miss Clifford?"

The duster shaken in the air, and releasing a little cloud of chalk. A squeal or two. Coughing—it only wanted one to start that. At least half a dozen of them out of their seats, waiting their turn for the duster——

The door must have opened unheard, in the general *mêlée*. The next sound that crashed upon Susan's ears came with all the force of Miss Booth's lungs behind it.

"To your places—all of you—at once!"

With the sudden shock of it, Susan changed from fevered panic to icy calm. The empty water-pot she had been clutching fell to the ground and broke there. She stood still for a moment as shuffling forms edged into their seats. Then she walked to her desk, flung a couple of books into her case and clamped it shut. She walked on, towards the door. She halted a second by Miss Booth.

"Could you arrange for someone else to dismiss them, at the end of the lesson?" she said. "I'm through."

"You're what?"

Susan was at the door. She opened it, closed it behind her. She heard it open again almost immediately, as she went on down the passage. By the time

she had reached the staff-room Miss Booth was bustling in after her.

" Miss Clifford, I take it you haven't completely lost your senses ? "

" No, I'm clearing out while I've still got a few left."

" You mean—I'm to understand that in the middle of the afternoon——"

" Ten minutes from the end. Just ten minutes too long for me."

Susan reached out for her hat and put it on in front of the glass. Mechanically, still in a frozen calm, she tilted it over one eye.

" Miss Clifford, will you please take that off again and go and settle your class ? "

" It's not my class any more, thank heaven ! I'd been thinking it might come to this one day, and it has, that's all. I ought to have resigned months ago. I ought to have done it the first day I was here. But I didn't. I let it go on and kept on hoping. And now there's nothing else left to do. I'm not standing another second of it."

Miss Booth was very red. Her eyes were almost as wide as Susan's.

" With three days of the term still to go——" she jerked out, " and no question of any notice——"

" I'm sorry about the notice. If it means a month's money they can have it. They can have it twice over."

" But this is—this is— You intend me actually to tell the Managers——"

" Yes. Tell them what you've been telling me, if you like. That I've got no personality and no backbone, and that I let a handful of children ride roughshod over me from Monday morning to Friday night.

Or you could tell them that I don't just happen to be cut out for the job at all, and that I was pushed into it from all sides before I realized what it was like, and that I've been going through hell ever since. Tell them anything, as long as you make it plain I've gone for good. I'm not going on and on like poor old Fowler. I'm getting out while I can."

Miss Booth had been bracing herself.

"Please listen to me, Miss Clifford, and stop this raving. What's going to be said if you leave without warning, without any given reason, and with every suggestion that there's been a scene? I had the engaging of you——"

"And a fine one you picked, too."

"You at least owe it to me to wait until——"

"Owe it to you? But I owe you nothing. From the minute you found I was having a struggle here, you made things worse. If I'd had your support at the back of me in those first few weeks, I might have just weathered it. But you let the class see I was always in disgrace, and of course that settled it from the start. You've never encouraged me or even smiled at me. I might not be cut out for my job, but I don't see that you're particularly cut out for yours either."

"Miss——"

"Would you excuse me? If I wait about much longer that bell will be going. I don't want to hear it again."

Susan pulled open the door, hurried across through the main entrance, across the playground, out to the street.

She walked on, trying not to think. Her hands were trembling. She tightened her grasp on her case. Her

legs felt unsteady too. She went on as far as the Park and sat down on a seat for awhile. Then, afraid that the children would come trooping in and see her, and stare at her, she moved again. She went on to Adelaide Road.

She sipped at her tea, and listened to her mother's animated talk of her doings through the afternoon. Sitting on the beach with Mrs. So-and-So, and how the place was beginning to fill up now. And she had almost finished the embroidery on that tray-cloth while she was there, and it was so beautifully warm, and the sea was like a millpond.

I can't start talking about it yet, Susan thought. I can't go through a whole hour of it before Dad comes in. Better to let them both know at once.

But with Mr. Clifford arrived Miss Booth herself. She was holding forth all the way up the path. They entered the front living-room practically neck-and-neck. And voices and exclamations whirled about Susan's head.

Miss Booth held the stage. She was used to it.

" I needn't stress my side of the question," she said, for the fourth time in five minutes. " Any suggestion of an upset on the staff, and of course it's held to be the responsibility of the unfortunate head mistress. I needn't go into that. But might I say that it would look a trifle better from Miss Clifford's point of view if she gave a proper dignified excuse and left in the regular way, after working out her term of notice ? "

" I'm not going back," Susan said.

" To have her suddenly rushing off like this— A little later, by all means, with a really adequate reason——"

"Why does she want to leave at all?" wailed Mrs. Clifford. "She was so nicely settled there!"

"She'll get settled again," declared Mr. Clifford. "She hasn't given it a trial yet. By the time the holiday's over——"

"I'm not even going back on Monday," Susan said.

"Oh, the matter of these last three days——" said Miss Booth to the elder Cliffords. "That's surely preposterous?"

"Absolutely," said Mr. Clifford.

"Just because of—well, I should say it was some kind of minor brainstorm, by the way she was speaking. She wasn't herself, so I'm not bearing resentment. She'll be feeling fresher after the week-end. And during the holiday she can be thinking over the question of the notice, and how she can put it."

"If she still wants to give it," said Mrs. Clifford. "There might, of course, be a real reason fairly soon. But not by then, I should imagine. And no doubt she'll be quite ready after her long rest——"

"Perhaps you'd like to finish talking this out on your own," said Susan, moving to the door. "But I'm not going back."

She went off to the kitchen, and after awhile heard Miss Booth leave again, to the sound of reassuring farewells. David came in and the evening meal was set out, but there was too much discussion going on for anyone to eat much. David had an opinion or two to air, when he could get them in. Who liked their work, anyway? Did Dad enjoy coping with all his overdraft merchants? And he himself—he'd spent most of the afternoon haggling with a couple of half-wits over one of those mangy bungalows out at the back. He'd talked him-

self hoarse, and they weren't going to have the thing even now. Did he come home babbling about chucking up the whole concern, any more than Dad did?

Susan had only one remark to contribute. She wasn't going back.

And when Hammond called, just after the meal, he set the conflagration roaring up again.

"You've walked out after all!" he exclaimed. "Why, that's fine!"

"Fine!" echoed Mr. Clifford. "To march home in the middle of the afternoon——"

"But that's all right. I told her it was all right. I said she could do it any time. Why shouldn't she?"

"*You* said— Oh, I see what you're getting at. But, my dear young man, because your name happens to be John Hammond, it doesn't mean that that school's in the hollow of your hand, does it? It's just the same as any other nowadays. Your name's a bit of its tradition, that's all. A relic of the past. If it prompted you to put this feather-brained idea into her head——"

"It's still got its Board of Managers, anyway, and I'm one of 'em. I haven't had anything to say on it as yet, but at least I can see that this is passed over without any fuss. Good Lord—what's it matter? It won't hurt them to waive the notice, will it? I'll speak to Ridgewell in the morning, and one or two of the others——"

"No, not a word, please. We mustn't bring things to a head. We haven't decided anything as yet."

"But she has, hasn't she?"

"She seems to be aiming at making herself rather

conspicuous all round, considering we're fairly well known in the town. That affair with the two of you in the school last week—well, that was a trifle unfortunate in itself, though we didn't say much about it at the time. But at least I'm very pleased to hear——"

Susan went as red as fire.

" —that you've put things on a definite footing, with regard to—your feelings for her," said Mr. Clifford.

So he had mentioned it, after all ! Oh, of course he had ! Susan jerked her eyes up, to find Hammond smiling down at her. His face showed no surprise. Just a hint of ruefulness at one corner of his mouth, and in the twirk of one eyebrow.

" Thanks," he said. " Just hoping, so far."

" Needless to say we expected—we knew from the beginning——" put in Mrs. Clifford.

Hammond glanced across at her, then at Susan's flushed face again.

" Bit premature to talk about it yet, I'm afraid," he said. " What about waiting until she wants to join in ? We were saying—er— Oh, yes. About this cutting free——"

The argument hurtled on. Susan sat and listened to it. Her father and his local position. Her mother and how utterly *silly* it all was. David and the question of jobs in general. Perhaps Hammond liked his, he said, but most people didn't. You had to fit in and make the best of it.

Hammond looked from one to the other of them and thought deep thoughts. He wished he could say them aloud. You, sir, he mused, are a pompous old fool. And you, madam, seem to be what is known in the asylum world as a " border-line case." And as for you,

strutting around in the window, there—you with your quiff and your black woollen socks—you've no idea what pleasure it would give me at this minute to take a running kick at your backside.

He left, finally, with the atmosphere still just as he had found it. Susan came out to the hall with him.

"Don't go back there," he said. "Don't let them force you back."

"I'm not going to," she told him.

"If I spoke about it around the Board to-morrow, it would help to settle it, wouldn't it? Then I'll come round here and tell them. Don't worry. I'll manage it all right."

He drew her nearer. He put his hand behind her head and pressed it for a moment against his shoulder.

"Don't worry," he said again.

And when he had gone she stood there listening to his footsteps until they had died away. There was something comfortable about the sound of them.

The end of Hammond's holiday certainly seemed to be going up in flames. Saturday's scene was livelier even than Friday's. And on Sunday, when Susan escaped with him for a run out for lunch, it was only to bear in mind all the time that she had to go home to more of it.

"Just put this resignation in writing and send it in to Ridgewell," Hammond had said. "It'll be all right."

"And what would you do afterwards?" Mr. Clifford had demanded. "Stay at home on an allowance? Wait about until you happened to find some twopenny-halfpenny little job at about a quarter the salary? What training have you had for anything else?"

Hammond's last day, and half of it gone already. They went on the beach after lunch, well beyond the town. They sat side by side and stared out across the sea.

"If only there were something I could still do," he muttered. "I'll have a hell of a week, thinking of you down here."

A few more hours, and he was going. She had to keep impressing it upon herself. He was going.

They found somewhere for tea. He had to glance at his watch once or twice. He had his packing to do, and he was catching a train just after seven. This evening he wouldn't be here. They would all start again this evening, and he wouldn't be here.

He was hardly speaking at all now. Neither was she. They came out to the open again, ran around a little while, drew up in Adelaide Road. He went inside the house to make his farewells. He took Susan's hand in the doorway.

"Well, it's come to it at last," he said. "Good-bye, Sue."

"Good-bye, Johnny."

"I'll be down in another week, if you want to see me."

"Yes——"

"Don't let them worry you. Curse them all, for worrying you!"

His hand tightened around hers, loosened, then tightened again.

"Don't go back," he said.

"No——"

They stood there a long moment in silence. Then he dropped her hand and swung round.

"Good-bye," he said.

He turned, by the car. She thought he was going to smile, but he didn't. She couldn't have smiled either just then. She gave a little wave and went into the house.

The sound of the car dying away——

"And now he's gone," said Mr. Clifford, when she rejoined the family, "perhaps we can get this thing straightened out a bit. We've been talking it over. Of course, you may be *asked* to leave, now he's gone babbling about it to the Board. On the other hand, you probably won't, with him in the background. I don't suppose they'll move in the matter if you don't. And we're sure that by the time the new term begins you'll have pulled yourself properly together——"

An hour later. Hammond was on the station five minutes before time. He stood absently smoking, as the platform filled up. He was jostled now and then, but he barely noticed it. He eyed the moving figures vaguely. His thoughts were not here.

An engine chuffed past to pick up the waiting train just beyond the station. Families were being rounded up, luggage clutched in readiness. He caught hold of his own case and began to walk to the farther end. And as he went, footsteps hurried behind him.

They were just part of the general vagueness at first. It was only when they were almost upon him that they struck sharply into his brain. He jerked to a halt, and turned.

Susan was looking up at him, her eyes wide and very bright, her face pale. The sudden leap that his heart gave seemed to send a shock through every nerve. For she, too, was holding a case in her hand.

She didn't speak at first. He stood looking at her dumbly. Then,

"You've been so kind to me already, but you said if there were anything— You said you'd still——" She drove her teeth into her lower lip for a second. She was struggling for a show of composure. "I don't know who else to turn to. You've been so kind— I thought I might risk it——"

"What——" His voice was slightly thick. He tried again. "What do you want me to do?"

"I can't stand that fight any longer. They haven't budged an inch. And I'm not going back. I can't go back, and I can't stay at home. I just let them talk, without arguing, and waited till they went out in the garden again. And then I slung some things together, and wrote that statement to Mr. Ridgewell, and bolted. I thought you—I wondered if you——"

"What do you want me to do?"

"Could I serve in your shop, or something? I like working hard—at something pleasant. I'd see that you didn't lose on it. Couldn't you take me with you? Couldn't I serve in your shop?"

Hammond stared down at her upraised face.

"Or perhaps something else you knew of——" she said. "Anything would do——"

Hammond spoke again after a moment. It needed rather a jerk to get the first word out.

"They don't know, then? Your people don't know?"

"I thought I'd tell them at the other end."

The engine chuffed slowly back, bearing the train behind it. There was running and scrambling, and many good-byes and resonant kisses. Hammond and

Susan still stood staring at each other, in the midst of it. Then his rigid form came suddenly to life again.

"Just a minute—your ticket——"

"I got it as I came through, just in case——"

He caught up their luggage.

"Come on, then!" he said. "Come on!"

CHAPTER VI

THE GREAT DECISION

THEY found a carriage with only a couple of people in it. Hammond helped Susan in with a hand that was slightly unsteady. The arm he grasped was trembling a little too. He settled her in the corner, put the cases on the rack and took his place beside her.

She sat stiffly, looking out of the window, raking the platform from end to end. But when the train began to move, she sank back. The couple on the other side of the carriage—two middle-aged men with insistent voices—were talking hard. She spoke under cover of it.

"I can't believe it! It doesn't seem real! You really don't mind? You really think it'll be all right?"

"As right as rain. Don't worry. Mind? You think I *mind*?"

"I can't even begin to thank you——"

"And don't start that again."

"But I'll fit in all right, will I? You've got plenty you could give me to do? Or were you thinking that perhaps something else——"

"No, I'll keep you with me. Let's talk about it all when we get there."

The train ran on, out of Clayle, through green fields. Susan rested her head against the back of the seat.

"Running away——" she murmured. "I never

thought I'd do it in the end. Another school teacher found missing from her home— It's just when you get to the pitch when you can't think or reason about it any more— It's like that evening I called at your rooms in that inn. All sort of hedged round by it all, and—there you were—someone to turn to."

She raised her head again.

"But of course it's all very well to get desperate and cut loose, but to thrust myself on you like this——"

"Why do you say that?" he asked her, his voice low. "You know better than to say that."

Her hand slid along the seat and touched his.

"You're so kind——" she said.

His fingers closed over hers at once, then let them go again. His brain still seemed to be whirling too dizzily to allow of any logical thinking. Excitement was racing through his blood and setting it tingling. And wild hopes struggled with cautious doubts. Does she mean— No, she can't— But perhaps— No, just a way out— And the whole lot were swamped every other second in the sheer exhilaration of the moment. He wasn't saying good-bye to her after all. He wasn't going on without her—just helplessly standing by and going on without her.

And the other end, and what was to happen there? That could look after itself.

He broke a longish silence.

"So you've seen the last of La Booth?"

"The very last. And Barrett and Miller and Mary Hooper and May Barnes. I can't take it in. It's just beyond belief."

"And—er—about telling your people. They'd better be phoned, hadn't they, as soon as we get back?"

He had almost said " as soon as we get home." As soon as we get home. God—to be able to say that !

" Yes, I suppose so," she was answering. " Though how I'm to put it, and what they'll have to say——"

" I'll do it. I'll tell them."

" Oh, would you ? Would you really ? "

" Of course. I'll explain it all beautifully. Don't worry about that. Don't worry about anything."

She began to relax still more. The feverish desperation with which she had first met him was changing into a measure of tranquillity. The steady rhythm of the train was soothing and restful. Don't worry—don't worry——

And to Hammond it was part of the racing in his head. It was like the beating of a drum.

Charing Cross Station at half-past nine. Susan's visits to London had been by no means frequent, and it was a trifle bewildering to her. She felt rather up-from-the-country as Hammond held her arm and piloted her across and out to the yard. They took a cab to Baker Street, and she stared out of the window all the way. She stood on the pavement and gazed wide-eyed at " Hunt and Hammond's."

" Oh, lovely ! " she breathed. " I've never seen one like this before. Are there many like it up here ? "

" A good many, but we try not to think so."

She looked at the name again.

" ' Hunt and Hammond,' " she said. " But why not 'Hammond and Hunt'? Wouldn't that sound better? "

" I thought it would myself, at the time. But Hunt was rather keen on it this way. Didn't matter much to me, after all."

His eyes were roving over the upper windows of Laura Buley's, next door. They were in darkness.

"Well, come in and have a spot of coffee and a bite," he said. "And I'll make that call. And then we can get you settled for the night."

"Oh, thank you—yes, I was thinking I'd have to find somewhere. I thought there might be some boarding-house or little hotel near. I've got some money on me. I'll be all right."

He smiled at her. He jerked his head towards the shop next door.

"When she comes in I'm going to turf you in there," he said. "Meanwhile, let's get going."

He unlocked the door of "Hunt and Hammond's," and let her wander around the shop while he phoned up the Cliffords from the passage. She heard the low hum of his voice, that swelled occasionally in some agitation.

"For heaven's sake don't misunderstand me, Mr. Clifford— But I assure you, Mr. Clifford——" And a little later, "But believe me, Mrs. Clifford——"

He was on the line a quarter of an hour. Then he joined her again. There was a trace of sweat on his forehead. He dabbed it away.

"Well, that's done," he said. "I shouldn't be surprised if there's a visit in the offing, but it can't be to-night, anyway."

"Oh, they're not coming to start it all over *again*, are they?"

"No, we won't let them. Come on and forget it. Come in here and sit down while I find something to eat. Hungry?"

"Just a bit."

"I can't set out much of a festive board, I'm afraid. We usually have our meals out, except breakfast, but Ellis has always got plenty of eggs and bacon on tap. Ellis? He's our factotum, the daily help. Keeps the place ship-shape and serves in the shop as well when we want him to. What about an omelette? I could manage that all right."

"It sounds lovely."

"And the coffee. I always do the coffee if we have it at odd times in the evening. I'm quite a dab at it. Hunt couldn't make it to save his life."

"Perhaps it's because he's never tried?"

"There may be something in that. Now you sit down and get comfortable."

"But why not turn the cooking arrangements over to me? I'm used enough to it, too."

"No, let me. Let me wait on you. Sit there and talk to me."

So she sat there and let him wait on her. But it was he who did most of the talking. He said anything that came into his head, keeping up a constant stream of it. He made jokes and laughed at them. He did anything to keep his mind off the fact that she was in his own rooms with him, and that they were quite alone.

He went out to the pavement at the end of the meal, and looked at Laura Buley's windows again. He came back, filled with a strange relief.

"She's in," he said. "Come on."

"But will it be all right?" Susan fumbled with her hat. "It seems rather— Won't she mind?"

"Mind? Of course she won't. Why should she? She's a great friend of ours."

He stood aside to let her pass, in the narrow hall, and as she brushed against him he caught at his breath. He carried her case to Laura Buley's private door, and gave a thump on it. He whistled up at the lighted window.

The door opened after a moment or so, and the light from behind fell on to a red head.

"Good God!" observed Laura Buley.

"What?"

"Come back a bit naked about the face, haven't you?"

"Oh." Hammond laughed. "I'm getting used to that. Here—this is Sue Clifford—Laura Buley. You haven't got your spare room filled up for to-night, have you, Laura?"

"So," said Laura, when they were left alone," he brought you back from Clayle, did he?"

"Yes. At least, I—really I sort of tacked on to him. I was running away from my job, and everything, and he—well, he——"

"He was there to run to. Oh, yes, he's the Almighty's gift to everyone. You didn't need a fortnight to find that out."

Susan blinked at her once or twice, at a loss.

"I'm going to help in the shop," she said.

Laura began to laugh, then sobered at sight of Susan's startled face.

"But it's *Hunt* and Hammond," she said. "Not just plain Hammond."

"I know, but——"

"Say two-thirds Hunt and a third Hammond. Or say three-quarters——"

"But do you mean I shan't be able——"

"Oh, leave it over till the time comes. He's away for now. Anyway, if Johnny's supposed to be looking after you, looked after you'll be. So you came trotting back with him, did you—trusting him like your Uncle Hector?"

"Trusting him?" Susan repeated. "Why—of course!"

"Of course," said Laura. "I suppose he'd take that as a compliment. What did you say you were running away from, by the way? A nunnery?"

She was smiling. She had a pleasant smile, so Susan smiled too.

"I'm sorry I strike you that way," she said. "No, it was a school. I was a schoolmarm."

"Good God!" said Laura Buley again.

Ellis was a little later than half-past seven the next morning. It was quite a treat, with Mr. Hunt away, he reflected, to be able to chat with an odd acquaintance or two on his way round to the shop. It was just on eight o'clock by the time the tea was made. He carried it upstairs.

Hammond was half sitting, half lying against the head of the bed, his hands clasped behind his neck. He was deep in thought. He seemed to have been thinking and pondering and wildly planning most of the night. He eyed Ellis abstractedly, then, meeting a blank stare in return, he came abruptly to himself.

"What ho, Ellis!" he said. "Here we are again. Yes, I left it behind in Clayle."

"You gave me quite a start, Mr. Hammond." Ellis set the tea down. "Did you have a nice holiday?"

"I don't know that the word 'nice' is exactly the one I should choose, Ellis. It was an extraordinary holiday. A sort of tornado of a holiday——"

"Was it, sir? Shall I pour it out?"

"Oh, thanks. Thanks. And talking about holidays, I must get in touch with Hunt. Did he go over Dinard way after all?"

"No, sir. He decided in the end to go touring in Scotland."

"M'm?" Hammond sipped at his tea. He paused. "What? Touring? What in?"

"In the car, sir." Ellis was surprised.

Hammond's cup clattered down in its saucer.

"He's taken the car *with him*?"

"It's a touring holiday, sir," Ellis reminded him.

Hammond thought that out in silence.

"Oh, well——" he said finally. "Did he leave any address, where I could find him?"

"No, sir. No address."

"Well, that's that." Hammond drank off the rest of the tea. "I can't write, then. Oh, by the way, I've got to get a move on. I arranged for a young lady to come in to breakfast. Make it for two, will you?"

Ellis had been moving towards the door. He stiffened and halted.

"A young lady?" he repeated. "To breakfast?"

"Yes, from next door. A Miss Clifford. Do your best for the occasion, there's a good chap. And *what* an occasion, Ellis!"

Ellis propelled himself onwards, and in a daze walked down the stairs.

Hammond was ready in twenty minutes. He fussed

around the breakfast-table and went out to the door half a dozen times, while Ellis watched him in growing alarm. Then the last time he came back with Susan.

"Would you open up at nine, and get things started, Ellis?" he said. "I may be a bit later."

Breakfast for two. Susan pouring out from the coffee-pot, and Hammond gazing at her as she did it. Gazing at her all through the meal, with a gradually growing intensity, and leaving his food half untouched. She had begun to talk at first, but after awhile she became quiet too, glancing up at him now and then, flushing a little, wondering and waiting——

Finally, when they had finished, he pushed back his chair and began to walk up and down the room, his hands plunged in his pockets.

"Have a good night?" he said.

"Yes, thank you. It was awfully decent of Miss Buley, but of course I'll have to find somewhere else before to-night."

"A bed-sitting-room sort of thing? All on your own. I wonder how much you're going to hate that."

She looked up at him in surprise.

"But I shan't hate it. And if I'm here all day—that is, if I'm really to be here——" She swung her chair round and faced him. "I wish you'd tell me straight out if there isn't room for me. It was just a mad idea that came to me on the spur of the moment. I didn't really give you a chance to refuse at all, did I? You asked me just now if I'd had a good night, but really I've been worrying about it. I can't keep taking advantage of you, merely because you happen to be more good-natured than most people."

" Good-natured," he murmured, " and kind. That's it, isn't it ? "

She fiddled with the edge of the tablecloth for a moment in silence.

" And there's the question of this Mr. Hunt of yours," she went on. " He'd have to—sort of O.K. it, wouldn't he ? "

" As a matter of form, yes." Hammond was still walking. He spoke with his eyes on the ground.

" And suppose he doesn't want to ? And anyway, it doesn't really seem to me that there *is* a full-time job here, what with that Ellis and everything. I just wanted to find out, that was all."

" There's enough for you to do, if you fancy it," he said. He raised his eyes. " You're not going off anywhere else, if that's what you mean."

" But if it's going to amount to you just—looking after me, without me giving proper value——"

She paused. He had stopped in his walk. He was standing very near her. Then suddenly he began to speak again, and his voice had changed. There had been tension in it before, that kept it stilted. Now the tension had gone, and his words came quickly, racing out in a stream.

" I want you to tell me something now. Suppose when you came up to me on the station last evening—suppose I'd said, ' No, it isn't the position I should choose, to have you working under me, or working under Hunt either. Still less working under Hunt. He mightn't entirely appreciate any additions to the staff at first, and though he'd have to get used to it, it might be a bit gruelling occasionally. And as regards any other opening—I don't know of one offhand,

and if I did, or found one after awhile, I shouldn't want you to take it, even if your people hadn't hiked you home again by then. And you're too young and too inexperienced to start living on your own, anyway, and all the hours you were away from me I'd be thinking and worrying about you. But you're at the end of your tether and I'm the one you turn to. You like me and trust me well enough for that. Well, come with me, then, and marry me at the other end.' Suppose I'd said that? Would you have come, or would you have stayed behind?"

She stared at him wordlessly.

"Or is that an unfair question to ask?" he muttered.

Still she made no answer. He reached down and took her wrist, and drew her to her feet.

"You're giving me a reasonable hearing, aren't you?" he said. "You're not going to march out of the room any second, or start calling me names, or anything? I said I was going to wait, didn't I? Well, things have speeded themselves up a bit since then. You're tired of all the fighting and the brow-beating. You want peace and security. I can give you that. And I can give it to you a hundred times better that way than any other. You want someone who values your happiness higher than anything else on earth. I'd do that. You needn't be afraid to—trust me that much more. You needn't be afraid, Sue. I'd do anything for you. I'd only hope you'd ask me to do things for you. To know that you were here because you belonged here—because you were my wife——" The blood surged into his face at the word. "I've never actually said 'I love you,' have I? I'll

say it now. I love you. It sounds a bit colourless, but I can't think of a better way to put it."

He was still holding her wrist. It moved within his grasp, and he let it go. Susan sat down in her chair again.

"I knew——" she said after a moment, her voice very low. "I knew that, when I came with you——"

"You thought you might be heading for a scene like this?"

"I thought perhaps—— Not so soon, perhaps——"

"And you still came."

"Yes, I—still came."

He stood staring down at her half-turned face.

"Would you tell me what you mean?" he said. "Don't let's—play around with words. Tell me what you mean."

She raised her eyes to his again.

"All I can tell you is that—you tempt me, Johnny. You've tempted me from the start. I've got into the habit of turning to you for everything, and I'd feel lost and alone without you. And I've been too much of a nobody, at school and at home, and with you I'm someone who matters, and it goes to my head. And I'm in a bit of a tight fix, and you're offering this as a solution, and I wouldn't be human if I wasn't tempted. When I ran away to you, I thought, 'I can't hold myself aloof, still, if he asks me again. Not now I've done this.'"

He was leaning towards her, one hand resting stiffly on the table.

"Well, then——" he breathed.

"But I'm making you understand, aren't I? It's because you go around smoothing things out for me. If

this last upset hadn't happened at all, I mightn't——" She paused.

"Thank heaven it did, then," he said.

"But I've always thought you ought to be really in love with the man you married, and I can't quite say that about you, Johnny. Do you want someone who's not—really in love with you? Not like you read about in books and things?"

"I want you," he said.

She looked down at the table. She looked at the hand. The other was at the back of her chair, just touching her. The willing hands——

He spoke again.

"You like me, anyway, don't you? I don't get on your nerves, or anything? We've been good friends."

"Oh, of course I like you. I like you tremendously. I couldn't help liking you!"

"Couldn't you really? Well, that'll do to go on with, won't it? And would you like it here? Though if you didn't, I could easily clear out and take you off somewhere else."

"I'd love it here. I love your shop. I'd like to do things in it and be a part of it. Everything's so utterly different from anything I've ever been used to."

"Well, then— Sue, can't you tell me in so many words? Why is half of you hanging back all the time?"

"I don't know quite what to do! Even now I don't know what to do—what I ought to do!"

He straightened up. He reached down and took her by the arm this time, and drew her to her feet again.

" I'll tell you," he said. " You can't get me to this pitch and then turn from me again. You can't let me think you're actually going to, and then back away, as out of reach as ever. Is it my side of the thing you're thinking of, when you say you don't know what you ought to do? I've got my eyes open over it, haven't I? You've put it pretty plainly. You don't feel the same way that I do, but I haven't given you much of a chance to, yet. And anyway, as long as you were happy, that'ud be enough for me."

" Would it? " she said slowly, after a brief pause.

" More than enough."

" You'd be happy too? "

" So happy I haven't dared think about it."

There was another silence.

" Well? " he jerked out finally.

" If you really want me, then——" she answered, hardly above a whisper.

She wondered at first if he had understood. He still stood staring at her. Then he took her arm again and drew her near. He took her other arm as well.

" Yes? " he said, his voice even lower than hers.

" Yes."

" Sue——"

His hands slipped round her. She found herself held tightly to him. She rested her face against his shoulder. A broad, comfortable shoulder, in its soft flannel shirt——

And then he put a hand under her chin and raised it. She closed her eyes as he kissed her. He had never kissed her before. No one had ever kissed her before—— But in the midst of it her hand crept up, past his face, up to a rumpled lock of hair that

had fallen across his forehead. She smoothed it back. His pleasant mouth, kissing her. No need to be afraid of it. His pleasant mouth——

He raised his head again. His face was flushed and his eyes alight. He looked down at her a moment. Then he tipped her chin up still farther.

"You don't mind, do you?" he muttered. "Just something I've been wanting to do from the start——"

He kissed her throat. A series of kisses, the whole length of it. Then he held her slightly away from him. His breathing was hurried, but as their eyes met he smiled a little, and she smiled back.

"I'll get more used to the idea in a minute or two——" he told her. "But just say it again. Would you just say it again?"

"Yes——"

"You really want to, and you're going to like it?"

"I'm going to like it awfully."

Gone nine o'clock. They were taking the registers. Who was taking hers? Miss Booth, probably. Funny if she were late for prayers herself. It all seemed funny now. A nightmare that you could laugh over on waking. Who would take her lot on until the holidays? Elliot, probably, unless they got a "supply" teacher in. Elliot could manage the entire school with her left hand. And how more than welcome Elliot was!

"God—it's wonderful!" Hammond spun away from her, his hands dug jubilantly in his pockets. He took a couple of strides up to the fireplace, and wheeled again. "You don't know what this means—you don't know— You're quite certain? No chance of any backing out?"

"No, I don't want to back out."

"You don't know what it means— Wishing like hell for something you think may never happen, and then before you know where you are— I can't settle down to any suave salesmanship this morning. I'd start giving the stuff away!"

He laughed, and she laughed too. Laughter that welled up irresistibly. The sudden infectious gaiety of him—the gaiety of everything— And Miss Booth might so easily be last in for prayers. The others were trained to quickness over those registers. They might so easily be all waiting!

How glorious laughter could be, sometimes!

"What about your people, by the way?" he said after awhile. "No fuss from that quarter, I'm flattering myself?"

"No. Oh, no. They were quite keen on you all along."

"Lord knows why, but I *did* gather that kind of impression. 'We knew from the beginning, Mr. Hammond,' I believe."

They laughed again.

"Well, when's it to be?" he said. His face was serious once more.

"When? You mean soon?"

"Really soon. There's no point in waiting. And Hunt'll be away a fortnight, and I want to have as much of you as I can, to myself, before he comes back. If I get all the arrangements through by the end of the week, would that be all right with you?"

"The end of the *week*?"

"But, Sue, we don't want to hang about. It'ud be better all round——"

"Yes—yes, of course. All right, then. The end of the week."

"You're really saying all this, aren't you?" Hammond asked after a moment. "You know, if I woke up and found *this* was a dream——"

There came a knock on the door.

"Mr. Hammond," Ellis called.

"Oh, can't you carry on, Ellis? Tell 'em I'm busy. Tell 'em I've gone out."

Ellis opened the door and sidled through.

"It's a lady, on urgent private business," he said. He glanced at Susan. "Mrs. Clifford."

There was a short pause. Hammond made a choked sound in his throat.

"Oh, show her in," he said unsteadily. "Show her in!"

His fresh gust of laughter came just as the door closed again. And Susan's was only a split second after it.

Mrs. Clifford had been travelling since well before seven, and had spent most of the night discussing Bohemians with Mr. Clifford. It was hardly reassuring to her to find Susan among the remains of the breakfast things. But a few minutes later, after a spate of news and a cup of coffee, all was well with the smile again.

"You impetuous couple!" she said. "You pair of dark horses!" Just fancy, Miss Booth, she ran away to be married! That was all the whole thing was, after all!

"And the end of the week!" she said. "But good heavens, how you take my breath away!" You were

asking me, Mrs. Collins, if I thought it would come to anything. Well, I just happen to have been up to London to see them married. Madly in love. Oh, madly in love.

"I *can't* go back just for these few days," she told them. "You and I can stay somewhere together, Susan. I'll have to descend on you for—odd things I'll need. And we can look around the shops and get what you want. At least—I suppose Dad could send some money down somehow—that's just a little awkward——"

"If I may—— Do let me lend anything," Hammond cut in.

"Oh, isn't he nice, Susan? Well, thank you, Johnny. And then any odds and ends you might like to add to your rooms, and all that sort of thing. We can get those. We'll have a lovely time!"

Hammond eyed her with his face a polite blank. Then suddenly he realized that the breakfast-table was still cluttered up, and he went out to relieve Ellis so that he could clear it off.

"I'm going to be married, Ellis," he said.

Ellis did not answer for a moment.

"You're going to be married, Mr. Hammond?" he said finally.

"Yes. At the end of the week."

Quite a lot had happened by the end of the week. The rest of Susan's things had been sent up from Clayle, and she had bought three suits of crêpe-de-chine underwear in pink, green and blue, or, as they would no doubt have preferred to be called, peach, apple

and duck-egg. She had bought two day-frocks and two evening, and a clinging wrap. (She thought of Fowler as she tried them on. Poor old Fowler !) Mrs. Clifford had bought an evening frock and wrap as well, declaring herself delighted at the excuse. Susan had bought also two jade smocks to tone in with the shop. Hammond had taken them out to three dinners and two shows. (" And her mother comes too," he would hum to himself as he struggled with his white tie in front of the glass.) Susan had fallen in love at first sight with the large, sunny front bedroom, and a general rearrangement had taken place. Hunt's furniture had been shifted into the room where Hammond's had been. Hammond's was stacked into a " junk " room, ready for later disposal. And a new suite in the sectional style had been installed in the space thus created for it. The living-room had a new blue carpet. And Ellis was verging on hysteria.

And on the Saturday, Mr. Clifford and David came up to town for a sedate little ceremony at a register office. And Hammond held Susan's hand very tightly, and murmured his words like a prayer. He was almost startled to find suddenly that it was all over, and that Susan was being called " Mrs. Hammond " all round, as though it were some kind of joke. And finally there were kisses and farewells, and they were mercifully left alone. The thing was done.

What a celebration it was that evening ! Another show. Supper at a little table on the edge of a dance-floor. Hammond with a strange awe in his eyes. Half incoherent, almost beside himself in his efforts to do justice to the occasion. Talking in little bursts, and laughing sometimes. Then falling quiet again, and just

looking at her. Looking at her and worshipping her with that strange awe in his eyes.

Champagne—and she had never tasted it before. Dancing—she had only done that in the drill-hall at the training college. But it didn't matter if she made a mistake with Johnny. And because it didn't matter, she didn't make any. And each time they went back, she waited for him to pull her chair out for her. And the look in his eyes seemed to set a crown on her head.

She wanted to hear him put it into words.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked him, once.

"You."

"What about me?"

"Just thinking how proud I am."

She laughed a little, her cheeks very pink. Proud —— And he was humble in his pride. He was so good to her. So bewilderingly different——

"Johnny——" she whispered, after a moment.

"Yes?"

"The strap of my sandal's come undone, Johnny. Could you do it up for me?"

Home again. They were going home. He took her hand, in the cab, and kissed it.

"You like me, don't you?" he muttered.

"Awfully."

"I'm not in any way—unattractive to you?"

"How could you be!"

His lips moved against her fingers.

"You know what I mean?"

"Yes——"

He held her hand against his face.

It was strange for Hammond to wake up each morning in Hunt's room. (He still couldn't quite get out of the idea of thinking it was Hunt's.) Strange to see the sun like that, as he opened his eyes. Most strange —most deliciously strange—to see it playing on Susan's brown head on her pillow. He liked to touch it, before she awoke, to run his hand lightly over the outside of her hair. Very lightly. She looked so young, asleep.

There was no early tea carried up by Ellis nowadays, but that couldn't be helped, of course. Hammond went down and fetched it. And if Ellis was keeping himself to himself a little more than usual just lately—well, he'd fall into line. Too much of a bachelor's man, Ellis had grown.

Susan had offered to take charge of the breakfast, with Ellis as her lieutenant, but Hammond had fortunately persuaded her out of it. No, let the man do it on his own. He was used to it. There wouldn't be anything for her to do, in that line. Ellis was fearfully efficient.

But what about lunches and things? Oh, they'd go out for those. They'd never gone in for much cooking on the premises. He'd prefer to take her out, anyway. He didn't want to see her grubbing around——

"But you'll let me help in the shop, won't you?" she said. "I'm so thrilled with the shop! To be able to do something I'm really interested in——"

"Do what you like," he told her. "Anything you like."

"Of course, I don't know much about it all yet, but

I'll learn. And if I could meanwhile just sort of play around in it, and find my feet——"

"Surely. Anything you like."

Susan brought out one of the jade smocks, and put it on. It tied in a floppy bow, just under her chin. She went into the shop in it, and twirled round before Hammond. He widened his eyes a little. Then he laughed.

He lounged against the wall, one elbow on a shelf, and watched her as she straightened a row of books, and graduated them with the tallest at one end and the shortest at the other. She looked like a mediæval page or something in that get-up, he reflected, with her thick hair standing out above it. And as for the books—well, Ellis would be in sooner or later, and he'd be on to them like a bird.

She flicked about here and there, and listened as he talked to the odd customers who drifted in. "Callers," perhaps, would have described them better. Men, mostly, and mostly young. Rather vehement and earnest young men. He seemed to know them quite well. They didn't all purchase, by any means, but (when the loss of the beard had been duly remarked upon) they glowed with him over Monets and Van Goghs and Cézannes, and one or two special bindings in tooled pigskin or calf, and the Line and Harmony of various of the pots. And they glanced frequently, too, at Susan's head peeping round over a smocked shoulder. And they showed a tendency, when they went out, to grope for the handle on the wrong side of the door.

Susan went shopping again, early in that week, and she came back agog with enthusiasm, and bearing a length of coarsely woven green crash.

"Curtains!" she told Hammond. "Isn't it the loveliest stuff!"

"Oh, fine. Where are you going to put 'em?"

"In the shop!"

"In—the shop?"

"Yes. It's just what it wants for a final touch. With that high window, and these just showing at each side—— I've been picturing it. They'll make a kind of background for those vases and things."

He looked into her excited eyes and smiled. What did it matter, anyway?

"Just showing at each side?" he said.

"Yes. Just enough to see they're there. I'm longing to have them up!"

"Happy here?" he asked, his eyes not moving from hers.

"Ever so. You know I am. It's almost like passing into another world. Being able to do what I like, and how I like, and to wear what I like. You know, I couldn't even do that, at the school. And being with you, of course——"

And having the willing hands always by her.

"And people walked over me——" she said. "I'm going to start getting that personality of mine into shape. I have got one, haven't I?"

"A most delightful one."

"You're such a comfortable soul, Johnny. And you like the stuff?"

"Immensely. But—er—there's one thing you really oughtn't to do."

"Yes?"

"Don't call those things vases. Just 'pots.' Plain 'pots.'"

They laughed. She seemed to be always laughing, here with him.

People had walked over her—— That seemed to her a dim past, as the days sped on. It was thrilling, when she asked him to perform some service for her, to see that eagerness in his face. Her confidence was growing still more. She could do as she liked with him, and he wanted her to. He didn't mind a bit. "You can leave that for half an hour, can't you, Johnny? Oh, yes, you can. Come out with me and let's stretch our legs." "Couldn't you get just one ordinary kind of suit, Johnny, for when you might want to look like an ordinary person?" "Couldn't you have your hair cut just a bit shorter, Johnny?"

She even felt occasionally that she would like to have one more chance to square up to Miss Booth, and Barrett, and the thirty-eight members of Class Two. Why had she ever *let* them? How had they ever dared! It all looked so different from the standpoint of Mrs. Johnny Hammond.

And then came the close of that second week, and throughout Saturday and Sunday a general feeling of expectancy. Hammond looked several times into the room that had been his, and that was now rather overflowing with Hunt's possessions. He tried various ways of looking at it. First a measured kind of survey. Then a quick dash, to see how it struck the eye at a glance. He shifted this and that a little, then made another dash, and finally decided that he would have to let nature take its course in the matter. And Ellis ordered in some more gin and some orange bitters, and saw to it that his household accounts were up to date. And he had everything off the shelves of the

shop, and ran a damp cloth over them, and patted them dry until his arm ached, and rearranged the stock again. And he went off in the end with the air of one who hastens away with tight-shut eyes and hunched shoulders, to wait for the big crash.

And at half-past eight on the Sunday evening, Susan was in the front bedroom, combing out her hair. She heard a car pull to a halt below, and went to the window. A grey car, a little mud-splashed. And from the near-side door was emerging at all figure in grey flannel.

He was smoking a cigarette. He gave a final draw at it before he slung it into the gutter. He strolled to the back of the car and unlocked the luggage-boot and took out a couple of cases. He stood them down. And then, quite suddenly, he raised his head and looked up.

A lean face, dark almost to swarthiness. Dark eyes that slowly narrowed, and slowly widened again——

She stood looking down at him. He stood staring up at her.

CHAPTER VII

"MY WIFE, HUNT"

SUSAN moved away after a moment, and Hunt picked the cases up again. A faint smile played for a second now across his mouth. But there was no sign of it there as his eyes came to rest upon the shop window. He stood still for awhile, almost unbelieving, looking from one green crash curtain to the other.

Then he dived his hand abruptly into his pocket and drew out his key and plunged it into the lock of the private door. He dumped his cases in the passage and pushed the door to again. Hammond emerged from the living-room, amiably smiling.

"What ho, Hunt!" he said.

Hunt blinked. He gazed at him blankly.

"Yes, I had it off down at Clayle," Hammond went on. "As a matter of fact——"

"Just a minute, Hammond. Just a minute." Hunt brushed past him and strode through to the shop. "I saw you had a visitor, at that upstairs window. But before I have to do any politenesses, would you mind telling me what in God's name——"

"Visitor? That's Sue. That's my wife, Hunt."

There was a pause.

"Your—*wife*?" Hunt managed finally. "But—look here, Hammond, are you trying to be funny? Because just at the moment——"

"Not a bit."

Another pause.

"But damn it, what are you talking about? You haven't had *time*! What in——"

"I've had all the time I wanted. And—there she is. You're going to like her."

Hunt turned his head towards the window again. Beyond speech for a moment, he flourished a wild hand at the curtains, and lifted inquiring eyebrows.

"Yes," Hammond said. "But what's it matter? She likes to take an interest." He raised his voice suddenly as steps sounded on the upper landing. "Sue! Come on, Sue!"

He took Hunt's stiff arm and drew him into the living-room. Hunt stared at the carpet.

"What—where——" he began.

"Oh, the other one's stacked away upstairs. It's all right. Sh! Here she comes."

Susan walked in at the door, with a face of formal politeness, but with very round eyes.

"This is Hunt, Sue," Hammond told her. "My wife, Hunt."

Hunt took a deep breath, and inclined his head.

"How do you do?" they said together.

They took stock of each other—the narrowed eyes and the wide eyes. The silence was so long that Hammond broke into it again hastily. But they had neither of them noticed it.

"Just over a week ago, wasn't it, Sue?" Hammond said. "We met down at Clayle, of course. I say, can't we all sit down, and all that? Sit down, Sue. That's it. Aren't you going to park yourself, Hunt? Had anything to eat, by the way?"

"What——" said Hunt after a moment. "Yes, thanks."

"Well, what about a spot of coffee? I'll make some, anyway. And you two can be breaking the ice meanwhile, can't you?"

He busied himself with the setting out of cups, and with frequent darts out to the kitchen. Hunt and Susan sat and looked at each other, and looked away, and looked back again.

"Do you like our new carpet?" Susan ventured.

He had a trick, occasionally, of not giving an immediate answer to a question. She was to find that out soon enough. He paused now, still looking at her as though she hadn't spoken. Then,

"Quite a transformation," he said. "I hardly recognized the room."

"I like it here awfully," she told him. "I do like the shop. It's fearfully interesting."

His eyes were almost black—straight lines of eyes and a straight line of a mouth. She wished he would look away. It was quite comforting to hear Johnny's clatter outside in the kitchen.

"Yes?" Hunt said. "I noticed the touch of the woman's hand in it."

Hammond was entering with the coffee-pot. He put it down and broke at once into speech.

"Sue was at the school, you know. Teaching there. Doesn't look much like one, does she? That's where we met, of course."

He poured the coffee out. A couple of blacks, and a white for Susan.

"I went barging into her room, and she was having

a hell of a time. She loathed it all like poison. Didn't you, Sue ? "

Susan smiled and nodded at him. Hunt's eyes moved from one to the other over the top of his cup.

" Glad to get away from it, I suppose ? " he said to her.

" Oh, awfully." She glanced up at him suddenly as she put her cup down. Had that meant—— No, perhaps not. He was sipping quite impassively at his coffee.

" Quick work, wasn't it ? " he observed. " A proper runaway romance ? "

" Couldn't have been too quick for me," Hammond said. " Oh, her people were up for the wedding, of course. They were quite all right about it. Weren't they, Sue ? "

" Oh, yes, they——" She caught Hunt's eye again. " They were quite all right about it," she added.

" And you waited a whole week after you came back ? "

Hammond laughed.

" I didn't even want to do that, but there were certain formalities to see to, and Sue did some shopping, and what not. Her mother stayed up with her."

An eyebrow cocked, over Hunt's cup. He went on sipping.

" Well," he said finally, as the cup clicked down in its saucer, " I must offer my felicitations. So we're to be a matey little household of three, are we ? "

" We'll get along fine," Hammond said.

" Oh, yes—— And, by the way, we want to start on a reasonable basis, don't we ? You'd have no objec-

tion to my voicing an opinion over a thing that I considered a concern of mine ? "

" Why, no—I mean—what——"

" Just the matter of those hangings in the shop window. I'd really like to get that settled on the spot, while we're about it."

" The curtains ? " Susan exclaimed. " But they're just what it wanted ! "

" They're all right, Hunt," Hammond said. " What's it matter ? "

Hunt addressed himself to Susan.

" The atmosphere of this place," he said, with the manner of one trying to explain as simply as possible, " has always been essentially—male. And I can't take over my duties to-morrow in a setting of green curtains."

She looked back at him.

" But, Hunt, what's it matter ? " Hammond broke out again.

She looked at Hammond. He didn't defend their artistic qualities, or go into raptures over how suitable they were. He was just anxious to smooth the thing over for her. Perhaps he hadn't really wanted them either. Just a little anxious . . .

" Oh, it was only an experiment," she said after a moment. " If they don't go——"

" Thanks," said Hunt.

" But, Sue——"

" It's all right. Really it's all right ! " She was almost passionately nonchalant, under Hunt's glance. " It doesn't matter to me a scrap. Not a scrap. I can use them up somewhere else, some time. It was only an experiment."

But she would rather have liked, all the same, to catch up that coffee-pot, and fling the remains of the coffee into Hunt's face.

Hunt brought out cigarettes, and he and Hammond lit up. Susan didn't have one. She wasn't used enough to smoking to be sure of her technique, and she knew that Hunt would watch her. She sat with a straight back, looking at him in the odd moments that she was unobserved.

Hunt crossed his legs and sat at his ease, his cigarette drooping between long fingers.

"So you had the beard off, did you?" he remarked to Hammond. "Pity. It gave you an air, and you could have done with it."

"I like him much better as he is," Susan said, bracing herself to meet that glance as it shifted to her. "I asked him to take it off. Or sort of asked him."

"Oh, *you* did?"

"Yes."

Hunt flicked at his ash and went on studying her, smoking with half-closed eyes.

"I looked a bit of a yob in it, after all," Hammond said. "Kids calling after you, you know, and all that. It had its drawbacks."

Shall I say I want to go for a walk, or something? mused Susan. Or will he *know* that it's because I can't stand any more of his eyeing me?

"It lent an air to the shop too," Hunt observed.

Susan had an answer to that.

"Hadn't you ever thought of growing one yourself, then, Mr. Hunt?"

And he had one as well, after that slight, disconcerting pause.

" I had," he said. " But I realized that I'd be rather too much like Satan in it."

She stared at him. Mentally, she sketched the beard in.

" Yes——" she said, her voice dropping a little. " Oh, yes—you would—exactly ! "

They both laughed at her. She was surprised to see Hunt laugh. A long cleft appeared at each side of his mouth, and his teeth gleamed very whitely, and for a moment there was a dazzling charm about his face. Then he stopped, and went on drawing at his cigarette.

When he finally rose to his feet, she felt a sharp dart of relief. He stubbed out the last of his cigarette and walked across to the door.

" Might as well take my stuff upstairs," he observed.

Hammond came over to her chair when he had gone, and sat on the arm of it, and held her closely against him.

" It's all right, isn't it ? " he whispered. " You don't feel in any way—dashed, or anything, now he's come back ? Everything's still all right ? You're still going to be happy ? "

She moved her face, against his comfortable shoulder. She slipped her hand in his, so that she could feel it tightly held.

" I'd be happy anywhere with you," she said.

" Really ? You really mean that ? "

Hunt's footsteps were going up the stairs.

" Of course I mean it. You're so good to me."

Hunt had reached the top landing. Hammond's arm suddenly stiffened.

" Oh, lord ! " he muttered. " I'd forgotten to tell him about the change-over."

He drew away. They waited, rather tensely, for Hunt's steps to move on eventually to the back room, over their heads. But there came a clatter of cases outside the front one, and after that, stillness and silence.

Susan jerked herself up, and ran out of the door and up the stairs, with Hammond following her. Hunt turned to survey them, framed against a background of sectional suite and twin bedsteads.

"I'm sure you understand, Mr. Hunt," Susan said. "There are two of us, aren't there, and only one of you?"

"Another suggestion of yours?" he answered pleasantly, after that pause of his.

"A pretty obvious one, wasn't it?" Hammond said. "After all, Hunt, when you're married you've got to have a bit of room to kick around."

"And you've had this one all the time so far, haven't you?" Susan reminded him. "It'ud be about Johnny's turn by now anyway, wouldn't it?"

"Oh, I don't know about that, but as things are——" Hammond said. He went on, but they weren't listening to him. Hunt was eyeing Susan with a maddening kind of pensiveness. She was standing very squarely and eyeing him back.

She was expecting a pointed argument over the matter, and she was almost disappointed that it didn't come. But if necessity ever forced Hunt to give way in any matter, he preferred to do it without loss of dignity.

"Well, as you say—two of you and one of me," he observed. He ran his eye over the sectional suite again, and Susan's whole being was daring him to breathe a

word against it. But he didn't. He merely ran his eye over.

"Where did you put my lot, by the way, Hammond?" he said. "Or did you give it away with a pair of book-ends, or something?"

"It's in the back, there. I had my other stuff shifted away."

"Oh, you did? Thoughtful of you. I'll go and have a look at it, then."

Susan went off down the stairs again, but Hammond followed Hunt along to his new quarters. Hunt swung open the door rather violently, and strode in. But he was unused, as yet, to the restriction here. He caught his shin on the low foot of his bed, and gave vent to a scarlet oath.

"Here, my——" Hammond nearly capped it by another, in his agitation. He thrust his head out of the door, and gazed anxiously around, then came back. "Be careful, can't you, Hunt! You'll have to cut that out. She might have heard!"

Hunt sat down on the bed and looked mutely at the wall in front of him.

"It's not so bad here, is it?" Hammond went on. "Bit of a shock for you, of course, to find your room gone, but it's not so bad in here, eh?"

Hunt glanced up at him, then back at the wall again. He made no answer. He groped in his pocket for his cigarette-case, but when he brought it out he didn't open it. He began to flap it against the palm of his hand, still staring ahead of him.

"How old is she, for God's sake?" he said after a moment. "Out of her teens?"

"Twenty-two."

There was a pause. Hunt's flapping became slightly more pronounced.

"Well, you certainly made a dash at it," he said. "If anyone had told me that I'd come back here and find you complete with a wife, I'd have laughed myself sick."

"Yes, I made a dash at it all right. Why would you have laughed, by the way?"

"Damn it, Hammond, can't I even be *surprised* at it?"

"Oh, yes—yes, of course. Bit of a staggerer altogether, I suppose. We're quite settled down to it by now, ourselves. She was having a thin time down there, and I'm trying to make up for it. You're going to get on all right together, aren't you?"

"Oh, first rate, I've no doubt." Hunt stood up and rammed the case back in his pocket. Then he swung round.

"Just tell me this. Is Ellis still wi'

"Ellis? Yes. Why?"

"Thank heaven for that! Why wondered."

He brought one of his suitcases to tl room and unclamped the lock.

"We haven't said much about our l we?" Hammond remarked. "Enjoy y

"Yes, thanks. Oh, yes." Hunt pull pyjamas, straggling them along the floor a tiny lace handkerchief fluttered out of them he tossed it away into a drawer annoyed him.

"Plenty of change, and what not?" Hammond said, tactfully ignoring the handkerchief.

"Plenty."

"Well, if you're going to start your unpacking, I'll breeze along down."

"Yes, do. You go off and keep your wife company."

He heard Hammond whistling as he went down the stairs. He stood still for awhile, looking around him at the cluttered room. About six square feet of floor-space. With those sprawling pyjamas, there was hardly any left.

He aimed a sudden kick at them, and they went sailing wildly into the far corner.

Susan awoke the next morning to the blare of a voice from the room at the back, and Ellis's agitated answer, floating up the stairs,

"I'm just coming, Mr. Hunt. I'm just coming."

Hammond awoke too. His arm was stretched over bed, and his hand was grasping hers, as it lay out- verlet. He had been holding it for hours, e had groped out in the dim dawn and found

blinking happily for a moment or so. He he hand and rubbed it against his cheek. He d himself on one elbow and looked down at her. e ran his fingers through her hair.

"You look lovely when you wake up," he murmured. "Your hair all rough and your eyes all big——"

Ellis was apparently struggling in at Hunt's door with a load of crockery.

"It's all right now, Mr. Hunt. You'll find it all right now."

He never fluffed around Johnny as though he were the lord of the earth. And Johnny paid half his wages. A bit more, now she was here.

"D'you know what you look like?" Hammond said.

"Mind that chair! Oh, my God!" drifted in from through the open door at the back.

"No?" she answered.

"You look like a brown squirrel or something, peeping through the leaves."

Evidently the chair hadn't brought about a catastrophe after all. Hunt was quiet now.

"Do I?" she said.

Hammond ruffled her hair still more over her face. Then he leapt out of bed, ruffled his own, stretched widely and rapturously, then donned his dressing-gown and plied his brushes in front of the glass until his head was neat again.

Ellis was bustling through Hunt's door.

"Yes, of course, Mr. Hunt. I'll see they're set out."

He almost ran along to the bathroom. After a brief space he came scurrying back, to call in through the door again.

"Can I take those down for you now, Mr. Hunt, and get them out of the way?"

"Ellis seems to be busy this morning," Susan observed.

"Ellis? Does he? Oh, Hunt likes him rallying round a bit, with his bath-water and what not."

"He's having it now, is he?"

"He will when it's ready. He usually has it first. Well, I'll float down and get that tea."

Susan lay ruminating. If only she hadn't felt so lazy and comfortable, she might have made a special effort to commandeer that bathroom *and* Hunt's filling bath. She'd do it one day. She'd do it now for two pins.

But she didn't have long to think it over, for Ham-

mond was up with the tea. Ellis had had it all set out. Hunt, as it happened, had been in a quibbling mood over the first pot taken up to him, and had sent it down again as being too weak. It was all ready and waiting for Hammond.

Susan was down soon after Hunt. She had had second turn with the bathroom. She encountered him in the shop, strolling along by the shelves, very sleek in a dark striped suit. No more early-morning *négligé* for Hunt. The days of that were over now, he had decided in some bitterness.

She hadn't expected to find him there. She had gone in to cast a rueful glance at the window. The curtains had come down overnight, and she wanted to see how much of a gap they left. And there was Hunt, abstractedly wandering, touching a book here, and a pot there . . .

He had his back to her, but he suddenly halted. His hand, that had been half outstretched again, was drawn back. He thrust it into his pocket as he turned round.

"Oh—good morning," said Susan.

"Good morning," he said.

He seemed to be eyeing her with an inquiry that was almost pointed. She felt an interloper. She felt that she wanted to sidle backwards and escape again. But after a moment she moved forward instead. If it was Johnny's shop, it was her shop too.

"I've just come to have a look round," she told him.

It was difficult to know what to do, though, with him watching her. He didn't relax and go on fingering the things again. He still stood there with one hand in his pocket. It was only when she picked up a pot herself that he made any movement. And then he merely

seemed to be restraining himself, by a great effort, from dashing across and taking it away from her.

She set it down again. She decided that someone had better say something.

"I like the idea of their all being different," she said. "The old stunt of vases always going in pairs——"

He winced visibly.

"Pots, I mean," she said.

She spoke again after a moment, with a touch of aggression.

"I do know a bit about it, anyway. At least, I've seen people do it. The infants' teachers at college went in for handwork. It was part of their course. And some of them did this kind of arty-crafty stuff as a side-line."

Hunt's preliminary pause was longer than usual.

"This kind of—what?" he muttered.

Susan looked across at him, and shuffled her feet.

"Whatever you call it, then." She paused herself. "Only I don't remember any of them getting struck all temperamental over it," she added.

He was still studying her as a clatter came down the stairs, a mighty clap sounded on Ellis's back in the kitchen, and Hammond came striding through to the shop.

"Hullo, you two," he said. "Chewing it all over? I knew it wouldn't take long to break the ice. It's all ready, back here. Ellis is just carting it in. What a day, isn't it? What a day, and what a life!"

There wasn't overmuch room to spare, with the three of them at that table. Susan sat with Hammond at her right, and Hunt opposite. And somehow she couldn't move her foot without encountering the edge

of Hunt's shoe, or brushing ankles with him. She couldn't reach for anything without meeting his hand on the way. She couldn't raise her eyes without looking into his. A dark grey they were, she found. Dark grey flecked with black . . .

She was glad of Hammond's easy talk, and his easy laugh. Eating was difficult, under those eyes, but she stuck at it doggedly. She talked doggedly too. "Oh, yes— Oh, no— Do you think so?— Yes, perhaps it is——" And all the time her heart was thudding quickly, so that she could feel each beat.

Hunt strolled into the shop after his first cigarette, and Susan went up to the bedroom. She made the beds and tidied up. (Ellis wasn't going to play chambermaid to *her*.) Then she took out the second of the green smocks, in all its untouched glory. She unhooked the price-ticket from the back of the neck, pulled it over her head and tied the floppy bow under her chin. She fluffed out her hair again and went downstairs. She went rather slowly, and she paused a long moment outside the shop door. Then she slid it open and, with all the nonchalance she could summon, walked through.

Hunt and Hammond were over on the other side, deep in study of a representation of a rather palsied earthenware jug with a lemon beside it.

"Of course, it ought to have the light striking from the left," Hunt said. "That's obvious. But then they won't see it as they come in." He turned. "Merciful heaven!" he breathed.

Susan stood still, alarmed in spite of herself, trying to gather her forces together. The sight of Hammond's smile put strength into her.

"There's no objection to my coming in to help, is

there ? " she said, rather truculently. " I tidy things up, and generally take an interest. I've done it before."

" Yes, she's done it before, Hunt. She likes to take an interest."

Hunt came slowly towards her. He stood about two yards away and poured the full force of his glance at the smock. He stared at the bow. He stared at the wide, gathered sleeves. He walked round the back of her and round to the front again.

" And you think that's quite suitable for a place like this ? " he inquired at length.

Hammond was laughing. Hunt's face amused him. And the day was fine and sunny, and life was very good for Hammond.

"You'll have to go slow with him, Sue," he said. "He takes his little business very seriously, I can tell you."

Susan wasn't laughing. Her whole head seemed to have turned hot with sudden rage. " Why have you got that on ? . . . You're not going to school in that, are you ? . . . Surely you don't think that's suitable for school wear ? " Eyes—glowering, officious eyes. And she had broken away from them . . .

She looked down at the smock herself. She looked up into Hunt's face.

" You're criticizing *this* ? " she said, clutching a fold of it in each hand.

She could hear Hammond's voice dimly. " What's it matter ? She looks as pretty as paint in it. D'you know what I think she looks like——"

" *You're* going to start criticizing what I wear ? " she said.

" I ? But, my dear—Mrs. Hammond, while my name figures on that plate outside, I'd like some kind of say

as to the public part of these premises," Hunt told her, with some apparent difficulty. " Why not stick up a few of those copper bed-pans——"

" Warming-pans," Hammond corrected him.

" Copper warming-pans," Hunt went on. " And some cock-eyed mottoes in poker-work ? Or change the name to ' Elisabeth Ann's Gift Shop ' or ' Pandora's Box ' or something ? "

Susan stared at him dumbly.

" Johnny——" she said after a moment.

" Hammond," said Hunt, " is it any good asking you to put in a word, or have you gone completely off your head ? "

Hammond came and stood by them, and looked from one to the other.

" But you're not being really serious over it, are you ? " he said. " You can't be ! "

Serious ? There was red battle in the air, and he asked them if they were serious !

" For the Lord's sake, what's it——"

" Don't say ' What's it matter ' again, Hammond."

" She looks jolly nice in it. It's practical, after all. No one else has seen anything wrong with it. In fact, some of 'em liked the look of her a sight too much, for my fancy. Pipe down, Hunt, and let her wear it."

Susan began to stroll away, down the shop. She gave a studied flick to the two folds she had been clutching, and frothed out the bow. She could almost feel those eyes on her back.

" It's not a question of ' letting,' Johnny," she said. " I *am* wearing it."

But she couldn't help glancing round at Hunt again. A very wide glance, with an apprehensive blink in the

middle of it. He looked as if he wouldn't need much more driving before he came across and pulled it off her. It was almost a pity he didn't try something like that. It would have been a relief to her to have been able to snatch up one of his precious pots and break it over his head.

But evidently Hunt wasn't pursuing the extreme course, and was momentarily baffled as to an alternative. He watched her like a cat.

"Well, that's that, isn't it?" said Hammond breezily. "Speak out and clear the air and all friends again. Lord, it's going to be a scorcher to-day, you know. You'll have to take it easy, Sue. Now, what was it you were saying about the hanging of that oil, Hunt?"

"What's she aiming at doing in here?" Hunt muttered tensely.

"Sue? Oh, she just floats around and picks things up, and takes an interest."

"But surely to God——"

At this moment, however, a young man who had been raptly studying an angular nude statuette in the window, came drifting in at the door. Susan busied herself in the distant corner, behind a stack of pictures, and sought composure there. The young man walked up to Hunt. To regular patrons, it was always a kind of *lèse majesté* to seek attention from anyone but Hunt if he was there in person.

"Misses Hunt and Hammond?" said the young man boisterously. "But what have you done with your pretty curtains?"

Susan managed to stand her ground for the rest

of that morning, though Hunt watched the smock wherever it went. She'd have to give it up. Yes, she could see it coming. She'd have to give it up. There'd be no rest until she did. And as to spending most of her time in here—she'd have to give that up too. She couldn't stick hours on end of those eyes of his, fighting all the while. Fighting again——

And it must be worrying for Johnny. He was rollicking through the morning as usual, cracking jokes over every conceivable subject, but his glance held a touch of anxiety now and then, in the midst of it. He made a go-between of himself, murmuring to them in light undertones when they were sufficiently far enough away from each other.

"Don't take too much notice of old Hunt. A bit set in his ways. He'll be all right if you don't rush at him too much."

"Humour her, can't you, Hunt? She's pretty young. What's it all matter?"

She didn't want to worry Johnny, and there wasn't really anything much she could do in here. If there were, Hunt wouldn't want her to do it. But if she gave it up, he'd have won. He'd have done his bit of browbeating and got away with it. And there she'd be—no personality and no backbone, and letting Hunt ride roughshod over her. Not that! Oh, not that!

She could come in now and then, perhaps. A half-hour here and there through the day, just to assert her independence. Would that do it?

She picked up a picture and held it before her, with her head on one side. But she might have been holding it upside down for all the interest she took in it. She wanted to go up to her room and be quite alone for a

bit, and perhaps have a good cry while she was about it. It had all been so lovely, so peaceful. Wearing what she liked and doing what she liked. And Johnny—yes, Johnny doing what she liked too. A haven. A Paradise, just for a week.

And now Hunt had crashed his way into it. Just plain Satan without a beard.

The sun was still out as she and Hammond walked back from lunch. It shone from a cloudless sky.

"You don't want to stew indoors all the afternoon, do you?" he said. "Why don't you go out—go for a walk—explore around a bit—go off and enjoy yourself?"

What did that mean? She hadn't had to bother about double meanings last week, but she had now. Was he just trying to avoid any more ructions with Hunt? And doing it mostly for her sake or for *his*?

She laughed at herself a moment later. Dear old inoffensive Johnny, smoothing things over as hard as he could. He'd got his work cut out this time.

"I don't think I will, really," she said. "Not by myself. But perhaps you'll come with me later, when you can?"

"Oh, rather! I'd love to! We'll have a fine old beano this evening, shall we?"

What did that mean, now? Was he just putting her in a good temper so that she didn't annoy Hunt any more?

But she answered, after another moment's pause,

"Yes, do let's. Just you and I. And I'll sit out in the back this afternoon, and laze and read."

"Will you? You'll like that, will you?"

He seemed pleased about it. Why, exactly? For her sake or Hunt's?

She sat in a deck-chair out in the small paved yard, with its borders of grass. She had taken a book with her, but she didn't read. She thought about Hunt. After awhile the sun made her a little drowsy, and she dropped off to sleep for a few minutes and dreamt about Hunt. Ellis brought her out tea at four, and when he carried the tray in he said "Good afternoon" to her as though he were off for the day. She answered mechanically. She wasn't much aware of Ellis at all. She was thinking about Hunt.

Finally she thrust the book into the chair and marched indoors and through to the shop. He wasn't going to think he had chased her away completely. If Johnny had said she could do as she liked, then she could do as she liked.

It was only when she got inside it that she realized she was minus the smock. Oh, well, he might keep his eyes off her for a few seconds at a time, anyway.

They seemed busy. Hammond was arranging a fresh batch of books and Hunt was talking down to a customer. And when the customer had gone he took a hand in the book-arranging too, and it was left to Hammond to sing out any conversation that was going. Susan was aware of a faint feeling of anti-climax. But not for long.

"Why is it," observed Hunt finally, "that when Ellis wants to clear off early, it's always you he gets hold of to ask?"

"Oh, I don't know——"

"Don't you? I should say, at a rough guess, that it's because he knows damn well you'll let him go.

And with these odds and ends to get out of the way, he'd have been useful as it happened. I was thinking of running off myself, as a matter of fact—for a swim or something. Anything for a cooler. You wouldn't mind finishing off by yourself, would you? Would that be O.K.?"

"Oh, I suppose so. Not much to do, really."

Susan gazed from one to the other. Doing as Hunt liked now. How easily he made him. How easily he did it!

She drew a sharp breath and joined in.

"But, Johnny, you said you'd come out with me, as soon as you could manage it."

Hunt turned his head quite slowly, to look at her.

"Didn't you, Johnny?" she said, looking back at him.

"But I thought you meant later." Hammond was a trifle nonplussed. "You didn't mean as early as this?"

She hadn't, but she did now.

"But why not, as it's *possible* to get off in the afternoon? I said as soon as you could."

"Well, I——" He glanced at Hunt, and back at Susan. Hunt said nothing at all. There was no play of expression over his face. He merely stood with his shoulders propped against the wall and his eyes fixed upon her.

She felt her hands begin to tremble a little.

"Let's make it as soon as we can, shall we?" she said. "If I go and get ready——"

She hurried across to the door, suddenly anxious to escape. She hurried through.

There was a brief pause, after it had closed. Then,

" Just a minute——" said Hammond, making for it too.

" Oh, by all means," Hunt told him.

Hammond found her up in the bedroom. She faced him with very bright eyes.

" We *can* go now, can't we ? " she said. " You *will* come ? "

" If you want—— But I say, Sue, you didn't really mean to make it as early as this, did you ? We could go off any other day, couldn't we ? I could arrange it quite easily."

" Some day when he didn't happen to want to ? No, I'd rather go to-day. You said——"

" Yes, I know. Out for a binge this evening. And we will, too. I'd be through by six anyway. And we can——"

" But I'd rather go straight away. I'd rather you took me for a run somewhere. I haven't even been in that car of yours yet. It *is* half yours, isn't it ? Or supposed to be. He's had it all over his holiday and all over yours, and now he wants it this afternoon ! "

Hammond thrust an arm round her, and she pressed her face against his shoulder.

" But, you little fathead," he said, rubbing his cheek against her hair, " we can use it any other time. We'll use it to death if you like. It's just that this'll look as if we're trying to be cussed over it——"

" Johnny——" She took hold of his sleeve and held it tightly. " Don't give way to him. Take me instead ! "

He took the hand in his and unloosed it. He held it against his face.

"What's the matter?" he said, after a moment. "Getting all worked up over such a little thing——"

"It isn't a little thing!" She reared her head up and her eyes stared into his. "It's a much bigger thing than you dream of! He's got you under his thumb, Johnny, and if you can put up with it, I can't! I can't!"

She saw his light eyebrows slowly rise. She saw his mouth move up at the corners. He laughed. He ruffled her hair and laughed again.

"You congenital little idiot!" he said. "You funny little devil! How on earth d'you get hold of that idea?"

She shook her hair straight again.

"Will you take me this afternoon, anyway?" she said. "Just because—because I want you to?"

He dropped a light kiss on her upturned face. Then he moved away. He turned at the door and spread his hands.

"Right, madam," he said. "Right."

Hunt was still standing with his shoulders propped against the wall. He turned his eyes as Hammond entered.

"I say, Hunt, d'you mind? Sue rather wanted a run round this afternoon."

"So I gathered."

"Can't very well disappoint her, can I? I didn't quite realize, when I said I'd take on. Couldn't you barge off for your swim to-morrow? Sounds a bit mouldy, I know, after I'd said I'd stay, but—oh, you know——"

Hunt didn't answer for awhile, though words raced through his head. Yes, I know. Just jumping through a few hoops for her. Landed you pretty neatly

in that fortnight of yours, didn't she? *And* her accommodating people, *and* her mother staying up here to see it went off. Came the unhappiness stunt, did she? How you'd fall for that! I always knew you'd get it this way, when you did get it. I always knew you'd end in letting some woman run you. Go on, then. Go and jump through your hoops.

"Don't embarrass yourself, Hammond," he said. "It doesn't matter a damn to me. Yes, you go and take your wife out."

It seemed to Susan that the day no longer began with waking in the morning—with Johnny gazing at her and smiling at her and touching her, as though she were some treasured possession that he couldn't quite get used to owning. That was just a pleasant kind of preliminary, a kind of breathing-space. The day really began with Hunt.

If she walked into the living-room and found him already there, her whole being seemed sharply to brace itself for the encounter. And he would turn to greet her with a slight tension that told her that he had been waiting for it too.

They were polite to each other. So polite that Hammond rallied them about it, his blithe grin at full strength again.

"All your Mr. Hunts and Mrs. Hammonds," he said. "What is it now? Afternoon tea at the vicar's? His name's Philip, if you fancy using it, Sue. Think he looks a Philip? "

Susan thought he did. There was a picture she remembered in the children's history book. Philip of Spain . . .

She was trying out her system of going into the shop at intervals, just when she told herself she happened to fancy it. There was little enough to do otherwise, even with taking over the housekeeping from Ellis, and odd calls on Laura Buley next door. And there was her independence to keep going. Perhaps it was rather too much of a childish gesture to insist on the smocks. Even Johnny had seemed slightly relieved when she dropped the idea of those. But she made her due appearances, as unconcerned as possible, and if she couldn't quite carry off half an hour at a time, at least she saw to it that it was never less than a quarter.

It was only Hunt's manner that baffled her. His early aggression had gone, and she puzzled over it endlessly. Was he submissive because he realized that he had to give way and make the best of it? Or was he merely complacent because she had cut her time down so drastically? In short, had she won, or had he?

Just those odd patches of Hunt, through the day, with breathing-spaces between. Hunt through the evenings—when they didn't go out—sunk in a deep arm-chair with his legs stretched ahead of him, reading, and when he felt her eyes upon him, glancing slowly up and slowly down again. Hunt stalking through her dreams at night . . .

She let a full week go by before she broached to Hammond the question of his presence in the living-quarters at all. And then she did so one night with a sudden dash of determination.

"Wouldn't you rather we were all on our own here, Johnny?"

"Yes, of course," he said. "I've thought that from the start. But it's a bit of an awkward situation, isn't

it? I can't ask Hunt in so many words to go off and find rooms somewhere else."

"Why not?"

"Well, I mean—we took the place over together, and he's got sort of rooted in it."

"Can't he be uprooted?"

"Oh, I don't know— Seems a bit— I suppose he's as much right here as we have, really, hasn't he? He keeps his half share going, and there's Ellis and everything——"

"He ought to have had the tact to leave of his own accord."

"Well, there it is. Seems a bit——"

"Oh, you're too easy-going for anything, Johnny! You put it to him. Do please put it to him."

He ran a hand over his head and down his face.

"All right," he said. "All right."

Hammond put it to him. It was at breakfast the next morning, and Hunt had happened to comment on the strangeness of the fact that although there were only three of them, above table level, there seemed to be at least a dozen pairs of legs underneath.

"I've been wondering, Hunt——" Hammond said genially. "If you felt that—well, that things are a bit different here now—a bit more crowded, and what not—we shouldn't be offended if you thought you'd rather—er——"

A second's pause.

"Clear out?" said Hunt, equally genially.

He re-settled his feet. He was the only unembarrassed one of the trio.

"Easier to get a bigger table," he said.

He sipped at his coffee.

"So you've been wondering, have you?" he went on to Hammond. He turned his eyes upon Susan. "*He's* been wondering?" he said inquiringly.

"I have," she told him.

"Yes? But I shouldn't be offended either, you know, if you decided you'd prefer a change."

Susan stared at him without answering for a moment.

"But we wouldn't do that!" she said. "I wouldn't want to take Johnny away from here. And I like it myself, too. I wouldn't want to leave."

"Wouldn't you? Neither should I. It all boils down to the fact that we need a bigger table."

Hammond clumped an agitated elbow down beside his plate. But Hunt appeared to consider the matter closed. Susan still sat staring at him. How effortlessly he had won this time!

He smiled at her suddenly, and it startled her. Those long clefts appeared at each side of his mouth, and for a second there was that dazzling charm in his face again. That frightening charm . . .

CHAPTER VIII

OUT IN THE OPEN

SUSAN began cooking the lunches. If she couldn't spend all her time in the shop and Ellis coped with the housework, she couldn't just stand about like a dummy.

She pointed this out to Hammond, and after a brief glance at her he showed himself to be enchanted with the idea. He ate the lunches and praised them to the skies. And he didn't tell her how much he would have preferred to go strolling out for them, as he had done before.

It was one way of using up the smocks, anyhow, Susan thought.

Hunt didn't join in. He still went out for his. He made rather a to-do about it nowadays. He was apt to give a gay stretch at one o'clock, and whistle a bit. And he would come back to smoke a cigarette in the living-room and enlarge upon the people he had run into, and how old So-and-so had looked in, and had passed on an extraordinarily funny story ("Remind me to tell you later, Hammond"), and how they had finished up with a party of nearly a dozen of them. Such hectic occasions Hunt's lunches seemed to be lately.

He was speaking of them again on the Friday morning, the second week after his return. They were at breakfast. The larger table had been installed by

now, and Hunt sat at one end of it, apart. He ran his eye over a paper and spoke at the same time. It was Hammond he spoke to.

"Pity you never come along to Brill's these days. People miss you. Always asking where you are. Of course, I've told them you're married, but they still ask."

Susan sat crunching her toast, her eyes on his face.

"Funny kind of place to take Sue into," Hammond said. "She might be practically the only woman there."

"Oh, naturally—not exactly suitable for women. But they're always inquiring after you."

"Well, I mean——"

"Why don't you go along with him to-day, Johnny?" Susan broke in suddenly. "Yes, do!"

"No, I'd rather stay here."

"But don't you see that he wants you to go? He's doing everything but ask you. It wouldn't matter to me. I was thinking——" She pushed her plate away. "I was thinking of going out myself, anyway."

"You were? But where?"

"Oh, I don't know— Yes, I was thinking of catching one of those Green Line buses and getting out of London somewhere. Having lunch down there, wherever it is, and going for a walk around in the country, sort of thing, and then getting the bus back. I want to do that awfully. So do go out and have lunch at Brill's!"

"But look here, are you going to be all right?"

"You go with Mr. Hunt. You go off and say to them, 'Here I am, even though I *am* married.' Me? Oh, I'll be fine. I'm going to enjoy myself ever so."

Hammond kept on talking about it for awhile. She answered him mechanically. She could only see the top half of Hunt's face, over the paper, but even that was looking faintly amused. She felt hot all over, wondering exactly why.

Hammond went out to the shop. Hunt folded his paper leisurely and prepared to follow him. But as he rose to his feet Susan rose too. He paused.

She spoke with a little rush.

"I think I'd better tell you—I rather resent something about your attitude."

He turned to face her again, eyeing her inquiringly.

"Do you?" he said. "What's that?"

"I don't know that I could explain it, but—you seem to take it as a personal grievance that Johnny's got married at all. Most men marry in the end, don't they? Why shouldn't he? You seem to be rubbing in the fact that there's a kind of domestic atmosphere around him these days. But there's nothing very wrong with that, is there?"

Why couldn't she put it to him coolly and incisively? Why did she have to flush and fall over her words?

"Oh, nothing at all, Mrs. Hammond," he said. "Nothing at all."

He waited a moment, politely, in case she wished to air any further opinions of him. Then he began to stroll towards the door again.

She left the table and made for the door too. He halted to let her through, but she was merely returning to the attack.

"I don't really care for the way you say 'Mrs. Hammond' either. Just something about the way you say it——"

They were standing very close. So close that she could have counted those black flecks in his eyes. He stared for a second into the wide brown of hers.

"And don't smile at that," she muttered. "Don't smile again."

He didn't smile. He didn't move for a moment. A strange hint of expression crossed his face. A vague touch of something like perplexity.

"Oh—the way I what?" he said finally. "The way I say your name? I didn't realize I said it any special way. I'm sorry."

She retreated a couple of steps, suddenly embarrassed again. He walked out of the door. But before he went through to the shop he paused and glanced back.

Susan caught her Green Line bus. She booked as far as East Grinstead. She sat looking through her window as she purled along through the suburbs. She was glad she had come, after all. Glad of that inspiration over the breakfast-table. A good slice of the day free from all thought of Hunt, if she only put her mind to it.

She alighted at East Grinstead, and found a café where she could dally over some lunch. Brill's . . . they had gone off there together, as they used to do. He'd have carted Johnny off again sooner or later, so it might as well have been to-day. She'd suggested it herself, anyway. She hadn't just had to stand by over it.

She mapped out her walk, with the assistance of the café proprietress. A good circuit through Peddle and Gorling, and she'd be back here in time for a nice cup of tea, she was told. No one could miss the way.

She set off. She liked walking. She'd said she was

going to enjoy it, and she was. He'd sit there and smile at her . . .

No one could miss the way. But apparently Susan could. Perhaps the thought of Hunt was too persistent. Perhaps the connection between Peddle and Gorling was too obscure. But half-past four found her at Miller's Heath, with a signpost pointing out that it was still five miles off to her tea and her bus.

She was tired. She'd have to give that café a miss after all, she thought. Here was an inn, anyway. Surely she could get something here.

Yes, she got more than the promise of tea. She got an idea. It arose from the landlord's hearty remark, "You set in that back room there, miss, and stay as long as you like."

"Are you on the phone?" she asked.

"Well, no. Not ourselves."

"But there's one somewhere near?"

"Oh, yes, in the post office, about twenty yards on."

"I'll just slip along there, then. I shan't be a minute."

Johnny—she thought as she went. The willing hands. Perhaps she needn't walk those five miles into East Grinstead. It was near the end of the day. A pleasant spin out for him. He'd do it in about an hour. A pleasant drive back for both of them. To have him coming to help her again. To hear his voice all eager over it. . . .

She shut herself up in the box in the post office and called up "Hunt and Hammond."

"Hullo?" That was Ellis.

"This is Mrs. Hammond speaking, Ellis. Is Mr. Hammond there?"

"No, Mrs. Hammond. He's gone down to an exhibition at the Leicester Galleries."

"Oh." Susan toyed rather forlornly with the cord of the directory. "Do you know when he'll be back?"

"I thought he'd be back before now, Mrs. Hammond. I should think it'ud be over at five, anyway. He wouldn't be much after that."

"Oh, wouldn't he? Well, I'd like you to give him a message the minute he comes in. The very minute, Ellis, if you would. Will you get a pencil and paper?"

"Yes, Mrs. Hammond."

There was a pause.

"Yes, Mrs. Hammond?"

"I'm at Miller's Heath, five miles off East Grinstead, on the right-hand side of the road, from London. He can't miss it. I'm going to have some tea and a rest at the Plough Inn here. Would you ask Mr. Hammond please to run down and pick me up?"

Ellis didn't answer at once.

"Have you got that, Ellis?"

"Oh, yes, I've got it, Mrs. Hammond. But I'm afraid there's an arrangement for Mr. Hammond to call on Mr. Peckers, the artist, in the early evening, to see about some pots."

Susan plucked at the directory cord again. Rather violently this time.

"But surely——"

"I think it was arranged over lunch, Mrs. Hammond, as far as I could make out. Anyway, he's due there about sixish."

"But surely Mr. Hunt——"

"Mr. Hunt's just out at the back, having a cigarette," Ellis told her. "Perhaps if you spoke to him he could settle it for you. It was his arrangement, you see. Shall I call him in?"

Perhaps Mr. Hunt could settle it for her. Perhaps with Mr. Hunt's very kind permission . . . The directory clattered backwards and forwards.

"No, I don't need to speak to Mr. Hunt. You can tell him the position. If you'd give that message to Mr. Hammond as soon as he comes in——"

"But perhaps Mr. Hunt——"

Susan restrained herself from shrieking out a damnation of Mr. Hunt.

"The Plough Inn at Miller's Heath, Ellis. Will you give that message?"

"Yes, Mrs. Hammond, but——"

"As soon as he comes in. Good-bye."

Susan went back to the "Plough" and had her tea, pouring out from a large brown teapot, and spreading jam on a scone with an air of brisk decision. Just be perfectly definite, and leave it at that. If Johnny himself had answered and said it was impossible, that would have been another matter. Besides, Johnny would have been different. He would have been concerned, distressed. He would have crawled with apologies. She could have said, "Oh, that's all right. I'll manage." And she would have found him waiting for her at the other end, still all keyed up with anxiety.

But to be coolly told by Ellis, with Hunt in the background . . . No, a stand had to be made now and then, at all costs. The drive would do him good.

He'd be glad of the excuse. Why was it he who had to see Mr. Peckers about the pots?

She half thought of phoning again about five, to make sure it was all right. But no, that would look over-anxious, as though she were afraid Hunt wouldn't let him. She had given her message. Leave it at that.

She finished her tea and began to roam around the room. She examined all the pictures in some detail. That killed a little time. She found a yesterday's paper and sat down again to read it. She felt restive and rather on edge, but it was as well to have made the stand all the same, she thought. It was crass stupidity to start wondering at this stage whether she ought or ought not to have made that arrangement over Hunt's head. If she let herself go, she might become almost nervous of him.

At half-past five she wandered out and found the landlord again. He was polishing glasses in the bar. She paid for her tea.

"Would you mind if I stayed just a bit longer?" she said.

He smiled at her broadly.

"You stay as long as you like, miss," he told her. "You go and set in there till you're properly rested."

So broad was the smile, indeed, and so approving his glance, that she was half afraid he might suggest setting in there himself any minute.

"I'm just waiting for my husband to fetch me," she said. "He won't be long."

Just as well, anyway, to let him know she had one.

"As long as you like," he said. "You set in there and wait. I'll show him in."

She went on waiting. The bar opened. Bustle and

clatter and voices. She went on waiting. And at ten past six she heard the landlord in the passage.

"Yes, sir, your wife's in the back here. All waiting for you."

She stood up and tilted her hat and picked up her bag. The door opened and Hunt strolled in.

"Tea, eh?" he observed. "I could do with another cup myself, after that drive. Let me have a fresh pot, will you?"

"Yes, sir."

The door closed, and he put his hat down on a chair. Susan stood just where she had risen, very stiff.

"And what fun and games have you been up to to-day?" he inquired.

She held her bag tightly between both hands.

"Mr. Hunt, I left a message for Johnny——"

"Oh, yes. But he was due to see Peckers about some pots."

She watched him dumbly while he strolled across to the window and looked through.

"Pretty well out in the wilds here, isn't it? Lose your energy suddenly, or something?"

"I heard all about Mr. Peckers and the pots," she said. "I heard all that from Ellis. But it was so obvious that you could have gone there instead——"

"But Peckers was expecting Hammond. That's how the arrangement stood."

"Your arrangement?"

"My arrangement, as it happened."

"And by your arrangement, I suppose, Johnny just —passed my message over? Asked you to come instead?"

"No, I decided I'd come on my own. I was thinking

of a spin out in any case. Hammond didn't get your message."

The door opened and a girl in a blue overall brought in the fresh tea.

"Ah, thanks," Hunt said. "Fairly strong, is it? Thanks." The door closed. "Have another cup?"

"No, thank you. Johnny didn't get my message?"

"No." Hunt poured out. "He was over at the Leicester Galleries this afternoon, and we decided before he went that he might as well go straight on to Peckers from there."

He sipped at his tea.

"Bit on the weak side, isn't it?" he said. "Still, tea has to be pretty good, after all, to stand any strength."

"This may all seem very trivial to you, Mr. Hunt," Susan told him. "It may seem that if I ask someone to run down here, it doesn't matter much who does it. It was obliging of you to come. I realize all that. But I *did* happen to make it plain that I would rather like Johnny to do it—just as any wife might try to get in touch with any husband. I thought he might conceivably have had the rest of his duties knocked off, in the circumstances. It simply didn't occur to you to take the car along to those Galleries, hand it over to him with my message, and go on to Mr. Peckers yourself?"

"No," he said, after a final sip. "That didn't occur to me, frankly. Even if it had, it would have been rather too much of an upheaval altogether, wouldn't it? Besides, he's had a good mouthful of air this afternoon. I thought I might have one now. Not that I packed up on the spot, by the way. Did it

in three-quarters of an hour, when I did get going. Pretty good average.''

Three-quarters of an hour. He'd left about twenty-five past five. And she had phoned at half-past four.

" And the mere fact that I asked that Johnny could do it——''

" Well, you know, Mrs. Hammond——'' He took out his cigarette-case. " Because you happen to get struck all impetuous one day, and go careering out into the country, and call up in the middle of the afternoon to be fetched home, you can't expect us all to go gaga and start running round in small circles.''

She put her bag on the table, before she should start pulling it to pieces.

" Smoke ? '' he said, offering the case.

" No, thank you.''

She watched him take a cigarette himself and light it.

" So you just hung around there for awhile, keeping me waiting to teach me a lesson ? '' she asked.

He smiled at her.

" Oh, not a bit. I think I came fairly quickly.''

That smile of his. . . . Her heart felt as if it were beating in her throat.

" It really all amounts to this, doesn't it ? '' she said. " You settle things the way you want them, and you think that's got to be that. If you tell Johnny to go and see Mr. Peckers about those damn pots, then he's got to go, even if I phone till I'm blue in the face. You think you can dangle him about like one of those dolls on the end of a string. And me too. It's all what you want, and what you've arranged. Even

coming out here this evening—you have to point out that you were thinking of a spin, anyway. I suppose if you hadn't been, you wouldn't have bothered ? ''

He leant back against the table, his eyes upon her unwaveringly. The smile had gone now.

" Why not have all this out with Hammond ? '' he suggested.

" Oh, I'm not going to run to him for support, if that's what you mean. I can deal with it on my own. I'm rather glad of the chance of having it out with you.'' But she must try to be cool, even though his eyes still kept her heart beating in her throat. How worse than ghastly if she suddenly burst into tears, or something appalling like that !

" You're like some grand mogul—some little tin god or other, with Ellis always padding round you and salaaming. Yes—Ellis ! He's another thing ! *He* tells me over the phone that Johnny can't come down because something else has been arranged for him ! And he's got a way of treating me as though I'm only in the place at all because you're allowing me to be there. If I tell him to do this or that, I know he's thinking to himself, ' What the hell's it got to do with you ? ' ''

The faintest suggestion of a smile twitched at the corner of Hunt's mouth again, and was gone.

" Well, tell that to Hammond,'' he said. " Worry his life out over that too. Tell him you want to get rid of Ellis and see him trying to cope with it. He wants him there as much as I do.''

" I hadn't got to the point of wanting to get rid of him.'' She clasped her hands behind her back, in case he should see that they were trembling slightly. " I'm

not so much concerned with Ellis at the moment. It's you I'm really talking about."

"Well—go on," he said.

Even when he flicked his ash off, he didn't stop looking at her.

"I suppose there's not much more I can say." She clasped her hands tighter. "It's just that I don't care about seeing the man I'm married to under your thumb."

A pause, and those unwavering eyes.

"Come to that," he said, ". . . as we're in the mood for plain speaking . . . I don't care about seeing him slip so completely under yours."

"Mine?" She almost breathed it. "*You'd* say that to *me*?"

"Why not? Good old pack-horse, isn't he? Give him a whistle and up he comes. I've known him over ten years, myself, but you've made pretty good going in your six weeks."

Words seemed quite inadequate now. Hunt went on smoking and he went on looking at her.

"How dare you!" she said finally. "How dare you!" She could think of nothing else.

Hunt went on smoking.

"I'm sorry if you're offended," he said. "You started it, didn't you?"

"I don't—give him a whistle," she went on after a moment. "But even supposing I did, is it anything on earth to do with you?"

"He's a friend of mine, that's all. And I always dislike seeing a man knuckle down under a woman."

She jerked her hands apart. They seemed to be tingling with an urge towards violence of some kind.

But she could do nothing but stand there opening and shutting them at her sides.

"So he can do everything *you* tell him, and nothing that *I* do?" she brought out at length. "Oh, it's simply— It's not even worth talking——" She paused helplessly. She walked nearer to him. "Listen to me, Mr. Hunt. If Johnny happens to think I'm someone of great importance, and studies my wishes, and—sort of dances attendance on me a bit —well, I hope he keeps on doing it. He's the only one who ever has. If I've got some kind of an influence over him—a pull over him—I'm going to make the most of it. I've had a good dose of being badgered about, and made to feel small generally. I didn't realize I *was* anybody until he came along. People just brushed me on one side and sat on me."

"They couldn't do both," Hunt murmured. "Don't mix your metaphors."

"I'm not really interested in however funny you try to be. People sat on me, and I cut free from it. And now you're aiming at doing the same thing. But I'm not going to let you. And I'm not going to have you interfering with Johnny whenever I want him to do anything for me. I'm not going to let you run his affairs for him any longer."

There was another pause. She wondered if he had taken all that in. His eyes had a hint of abstraction about them, as they had had that morning in the living-room. He drew them suddenly away and pressed his cigarette out in the ash-tray.

"Here, we'd better get going," he said. "We can't stick in here for the rest of the evening."

He stood up from the table, and she drew back a

little. Not even any further argument over it all. Brushed on one side . . .

"I don't think I'll trouble you to drive me after all," she said. "I feel quite rested now, and very energetic. I think I'll walk into East Grinstead and get the bus."

He didn't even seem surprised, much less alarmed. Only amused. The smile appeared again.

"Oh, come, Mrs. Hammond——" he reproved her. "You can't really start on a tack like that, can you?"

"I don't care what you think about it. I'd like that walk. If you imagine I can drive placidly home with you after all this— I've paid my bill. You needn't bother about that——"

She walked briskly to the door. But he must have moved too, for as she reached it his hand closed upon her wrist, and spun her round to face him.

"Don't be a fool, Susan," he said.

She looked up into his eyes. He stared down into the wide brown of hers. The throbbing had begun in her throat again, more frightening than ever. Her wrist throbbed too, in the grip of his fingers. For the moment she forgot that she was just going out. She forgot that she was in the Plough Inn at Miller's Heath at all. She was only aware of the nearness of him and the touch of him.

He moved his hand, loosening it. He moved it farther up her arm, and down again. But he didn't take it away.

"It is Susan, isn't it?" he muttered. "You couldn't have been christened Sue?"

"No. Yes, it is——"

She hardly knew how she answered. His eyes

looked strange. Very fixed, with a faint gleam of light in them. His hand moved again. And then, slowly, it dropped.

He pulled open the door after awhile.

"If you go and wait in the car," he said, "I'll just settle for my tea."

She walked out to the open. She slipped into the seat and sat with her hands pressed tightly down at each side.

"Oh, no——" she thought. "Oh, *no*——"

Hunt was listening to the landlord's friendly chatter as he pocketed his change.

"God!" he was thinking.

CHAPTER IX

THE STORM GATHERS

WHEN he joined her, his face was as unmoved as ever, and she had drawn her hands up again, and sat with them linked in her lap. He took his place at the wheel and they set off.

They spoke now and then. He asked her about the run down in the bus, and she told him about it. She told him about the woman in the café and the walk she had had planned for her, and how she missed it somehow. She didn't much care if he listened or not. It was something to say.

But there were horrible silences. He offered her a cigarette again and this time she took it. It was rather apt to scatter its ash over her now and then, but she was glad of the chance to smoke it. It was something to do.

He looked at her feet out in front of her. Her slim ankles and the lower half of her legs. She looked at his long-fingered hands on the wheel.

She tried not to think, but her mind whirled with thought unceasingly. And resentment burned its way through again. A new resentment, sharper and fiercer. He shouldn't do that. No, not that! Johnny. . . .

And Hunt drove on, his perplexity clearing and showing strange things underneath it. He tried to smother them in mental curses. He wondered if his forehead were as damp as it felt, beneath his hat. Hammond. . . .

He drove very fast. He swung round bends and corners at a pace that alarmed her. Once, as they neared cross-roads and she saw another car approaching from the side, she clutched instinctively at his arm. It stiffened. He went on without slackening. And when the crossing was past, and she had drawn back,

"Don't you know better than to do that?" he said.

They glanced at each other with set faces.

"It was pulling up. It was the only thing for miles," he told her. "Don't—put your hands on me like that again."

They entered London. They drove through in silence to Baker Street. He left her at their door while he went on to garage the car. She was hoping wildly that Johnny was in. But he wasn't. She pulled off her hat and sat down in the living-room, and when a key was thrust into the lock she prayed that it was Johnny. But it wasn't. It was Hunt again.

He walked through and set about mixing himself a drink.

"Have one?" he said suddenly.

"Yes, please."

"Want a bit of a kick in it?"

"Yes, please."

He brought it, and began to stroll about the room. She didn't look at him. She just listened to his aimless footsteps.

She sipped at her drink. Was this one of the sort that you tipped straight down? Johnny had laughed at her over the cocktails, that evening at Folkestone. They had both laughed a lot, that first evening out together. . . .

She sipped again, dubiously.

"Don't you like it?" Hunt said.

He must be watching her. Walking about from one side to the other, but watching her all the time. She drank half of it off.

"Oh, yes, thanks."

She finished it. She rose and picked up her hat.

"I'll take my things upstairs," she said.

She stayed there until she heard the clatter of the front door, a yelled bar or two of a song. Johnny was in.

She went downstairs again. He was holding forth in the living-room about Peckers and the pots, but he broke off at once as she walked in. He looked so delighted to see her.

"Hullo, Sue! Enjoy your little jaunt out?"

"Yes, awfully. But as a matter of fact, I——"

"She phoned up from somewhere off East Grinstead. Got tired," Hunt said. "I went down and brought her back."

"Tired?" He looked anxious now. "You didn't crock up or anything?"

"No, I just fancied—being driven back."

"Well, thanks, Hunt. Wish I'd known. I'd have gone myself."

They both watched him as he went across to mix his own drink. They didn't look at each other.

"Coming out for a bite, Sue?" he said. "Then you can tell me all about your day."

"Yes. Yes, I'd like to."

"What about you, Hunt?"

"No, thanks. I'll go a bit later."

"Car runs well after that greasing, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes. And talking about the car——" Hunt's eyes moved to Susan's and away again. "Any objection to my having it on Sunday?"

What was he trying to do now, she wondered. Bait her, or something?

"You want it on Sunday?" she said.

"That's what I was suggesting, yes."

Hammond put his glass down and ran his hands over his hair and got ready.

"You mean because Johnny and I had it last Sunday? But you didn't want it then. And you had it on the Saturday, and you seem to have it most evenings. It *is* half Johnny's, isn't it?"

"The idea appeals to you too now, does it?"

They might have been arguing about anything. The car . . . What did the car matter? Johnny's rights, even . . . Just a meeting-ground at the moment. Strange emotions fought in their eyes.

"Look here——" said Hammond. "Let's talk it over. Why three perfectly friendly people can't come to some arrangement——" He flourished a hand widely.

"The best arrangement's two cars," Hunt said. "We'd better get down to that."

"But Johnny doesn't want to start increasing his expenses unnecessarily," Susan pointed out. "It's different for a bachelor. He might as well be in on this sharing arrangement, if you *do* share."

"Oh, doesn't he?" said Hunt. "Might he?"

"Look here——" said Hammond again. "If this Sunday stunt's so popular, what about joining forces for it, and having a really enjoyable day together? I was going to say 'for once,' but—well, you know what

I mean—have a good time, and shake a hand or two, as it were?"

They both stared at him. Hunt lowered his eyes first.

"All right," he said suddenly and quite unexpectedly. "But we'll make it a foursome. I'll take Laura Buley."

When Susan went up for her hat and coat again, Hammond followed her into the bedroom.

"If you really can't cotton on to Hunt," he said, "we'll have to arrange some kind of change, that's all. You haven't been having a row, or anything?"

"No, of course not." She turned round from the glass. "Everything's—all right."

"You look awfully pretty in that hat. I've missed you to-day."

He came towards her, and she braced herself for when his hands closed over her arms. And then she relaxed against him, holding the lapel of his coat.

"I've missed you too," she murmured. She clung tighter to the lapel. "I've missed you a lot."

His hands slipped right round her. He drew her closer.

"That's about the nicest thing you've ever said to me," he told her.

She pressed her face against the comfortable shoulder. She could find no answer now.

"And when you say things like that," he went on after awhile, "I'm tempted to ask you something." Her hand was just over his heart. She could feel it beating. "I haven't bothered you with it before, but of course—it's never been really out of my mind. You

said you couldn't force things, didn't you ? But sometimes they might grow on their own—if you waited ? Funny you can't put it into words properly, when you want to——"

Her eyes were tightly closed. Sometimes these things grew. . . . But sometimes they flamed up to change the whole world in a second. Just at the sudden grasp of a hand on one's wrist, for instance. Oh, Johnny. . . .

He gave a little laugh. A mere breath of a laugh.

" Or perhaps I'm rushing you too much ? " he said. Then he caught her up higher against him, and bent his head so that his face rested against hers. " Am I rushing you too much ? "

Her eyes were still shut. Her hands crept up his arms, and closed about his shoulders. Warm comfort. Warm security. Johnny to cling to tightly, while she fought the thing away.

" No, you're not rushing me——" she answered. " Yes, they do grow——"

He raised his head, and turned her face up. She was looking into his eyes now. They were grey too, but light. A touch of blue in them. Pleasant eyes. . . .

His head was bent again. His mouth came down upon hers. He kept it there a long while, and all the time her hands still clung about his shoulders.

He pulled her hat off, finally. He kissed her hair.

" You know that frock you wore—the evening after we were married ? Put it on again. Let's do another show, and have supper at the same place afterwards. We might even get the same table. Let's have that evening over again, all the same——"

He let her go and strode over to his wardrobe, and

flung his dress clothes on his bed. Then he came back and caught her close again, and ran his fingers through her hair, and tipped back her head and kissed her throat. Something leapt and rioted in his eyes.

He would be gay this evening. He would abandon himself to it. He would laugh. She must be gay too. She must laugh too.

She began to wonder, on the Saturday, if she had been mistaken in that brief scene with Hunt. Perhaps he had felt nothing, or all but nothing. Perhaps he didn't realize . . .

He didn't speak much at breakfast, but then he never spoke much. She felt his eyes upon her from time to time, but then she had often done that. He addressed his short remarks mostly to Hammond, but that was just as usual.

She had wanted to alter the arrangement for Sunday, but she decided to let it go. If he didn't realize, it didn't matter. If he did, the less obvious gestures she made, the better.

So it was a foursome with Laura Buley. Laura Buley in a coarse linen hat over one side of her face, allowing most of her hair to escape, and an ochre cream on her bare legs. Hunt drove, and she sat in front with him, and Susan and Hammond squashed into the occasional seats at the back.

For awhile she was glad of Laura Buley. She took Hunt's attention off. He seemed engrossed from the start. And then, to her horror, she began to resent her. Hunt was exerting himself. She watched him playing the perfect cavalier. That deep, smooth voice of his, and that smile . . . That something in his

manner that seemed to proclaim that of all people in the world, none could possibly be more interesting to him than Laura Buley. . . .

Hammond twisted his long legs about and talked in gay bursts. He was still as blithe as a lark. When he slid his hand along and closed it tightly over hers, she smiled back at him, and moved her fingers up within his. But she was thinking, I can't really feel like this about them. It can't be that I really mind. I must have a little sanity left.

And then came another cold wave of alarm, to blot out the resentment. It was when she began to realize for certain that Hunt was acting a part. She began to notice that his shoulders moved very slightly every time Hammond laughed. A faint suggestion of stiffening. She could see his eyes in the central driving mirror. The smile never touched those. He was talking more than he usually did, and she could feel the effort underneath it. And once, when she questioned Hammond about a passing point of interest, it was Hunt who unthinkingly turned his head to answer her, almost in the middle of a sentence of his own. And later, when Hammond lifted her hand to drop a brief kiss on it, forgetful of those eyes in the mirror, she saw them wince.

Hammond's high spirits seemed to pluck at his nerves more and more as the day went on. Susan was longing wildly for the end of it. Hammond leaning back in his chair at lunch, with his legs stretched out before him, going into riotous details about the rather elevated customer who had skidded across the shop on their rug. Hunt's fingers drumming a little as he gazed over at him.

"Aren't you making yourself a bit conspicuous?" he shot out after awhile.

"Oh, leave him alone, Philip. He's all right," Laura said. She always treated Hammond as though he were an engaging small boy.

"Yes, he's all right," Hammond agreed. "Sounds like that Rah-rah-rah kind of thing they say in some of those American college films—— 'What's the matter with Johnny Hammond? He's all right. Who's all right? Johnny——'"

"Oh, for God's sake!" Hunt muttered.

"And an old bird came in to me the other day——" Laura began.

"Would you mind not saying anything that's going to make Hammond laugh again?" Hunt asked her.

They treated it as a joke. Only Susan realized that it wasn't. Hunt's fingers still drummed, along the edge of the table. His eyes met hers and jerked sharply away.

They were driving home, finally. The day was over. Laura had an evening engagement, and Hunt took her along to it. Hammond threw his hat on the living-room table, and Susan's after it, and sat down with her in an arm-chair.

"I've been wanting all day to get you to myself," he told her. "I've been feeling—oh, you know—this is just the start of it, and all the months and years ahead—I've been wanting to say all kinds of things. I could have done a fandango when Hunt cleared off with Laura."

He waited awhile.

"Well, couldn't you?" he added. "Enter into it a little, can't you, for the sake of politeness?"

" Yes, I'm glad he stayed out, Johnny——" she said. She let him play with her hands and twist her wedding ring round. " We'll have to be alone next Sunday," she went on. " He'll have to have the car if he wants it, but—it's better to be on our own."

" Getting a bit more used to him on the whole, though, are you ? "

He slipped the ring up and down her finger.

" Well ? " he said after a moment. " Are you ? "

" Oh, yes, I'm getting more used to him——" This is just the start of it, and all the months and years ahead—what of those ?

" Perhaps he and Laura——" she said. " Do you think there's likely to be—anything between them ? "

" Lord, no ! He admires her, of course, in his way. A pretty narrow way, really. She's always got someone or other hanging around, in any case. No, nothing within a mile of that. Just as well for her, I suppose. He's a queer kind of devil sometimes. At least, I imagine he'd be a queer kind of devil looked at from that angle."

The ring-slipping was hampered now. Her fingers were tightly shut.

" Look here," he said, standing up, " I'm going to make some coffee, and we're going to settle down like one of those advertisements of a furnishing company. Mr. and Mrs. Hammond at home. You put your head back on this and——"

" No, Johnny, do let's go out somewhere," she said suddenly.

He opened his mouth and shut it again.

" Where ? " he said, after a pause.

" Oh, anywhere ! "

"Sunday evening in London?"

"We'll find something to do, won't we? We'll find something. I just—feel like going out. Couldn't we, Johnny?"

He paused again.

"All right," he said. "If you want to— All right."

Hunt seemed to give no sign, as the days went on. Except that he was more silent than usual. And if she glanced up at him it would always be to find his eyes moving away. And if she walked across to a door, she always knew that they followed her.

She watched his hands at the breakfast-table. They weren't like Johnny's hands. Johnny's were larger, Hunt's were longer. Johnny going through life opening doors for other people. Hunt flipping his fingers and getting what he wanted. The potency of those hands. . . .

She had wanted to put an end to her brief visits into the shop, but she decided to go on with them. It would be like giving up the last of her independence to him. And it would show him the truth too plainly. It would show him that she was afraid. She would go in and act as she had always done. She would look at him squarely now and then and speak to him sometimes. She mustn't falter over that. Johnny would be there, anyway. Johnny would always be there.

So she kept it up rigidly. She slipped through that inner door every morning, sometimes on a thought-out pretext, sometimes "just to see how they were going on, and was there anything she could do?"

She tried to bear in mind how wonderful it all was

before he came. Wearing the green smocks and putting up the curtains. Hadn't she disliked and resented him from the start?

No, it was no good. Those visits were just spells of concentrated Hunt. The slow swing of Hunt's shoulders as he walked—and he seemed to be walking most of the time that she was there. Hunt's lean profile against the window. And occasionally Hunt's brief glance. She tried to meet it steadily. It was easier when she kept her hands out of his sight.

But one day they found themselves without the background of Hammond. As she entered, he was removing packages of books into the small stock-room at the back.

"Hullo, Sue!" he sang out. "Got to get these arranged. Want something to do? Hunt's turning over some pictures. He'll let you hold them for him, won't you, Hunt?"

And he was gone.

Hunt had looked up from the picture in his hands. She forced herself on towards him. He watched her.

"Shall I hold them, then?" she said. She didn't know quite how she said it, or why.

He put the picture down and walked away from her. Then he turned at the window and walked back.

"Why do you let him call you that?" he said.

"You mean—'Sue'? I wanted him to."

She caught hold of the picture he had discarded.

"Mind those edges!" He took it away from her. And his hand had touched hers before he put it down again.

They both stared down at it. He raised his eyes

first. She knew that they were fixed upon her, but she had to look up. And he didn't jerk his gaze away this time. She couldn't draw hers free either. . . .

"Why do you come in here?" he said finally.

Would her voice be quite level when she answered him?

"For the same reason that I've always come in." No, not very level. She applied herself desperately to it. "Because I want to feel I belong here too—when I want to."

"There's nothing you can do. You know that, don't you?"

"There might be, sometimes. I like it in here——"

Hunt's hand was moving against his side. She could hear it.

"Meanwhile Hammond's going to be a good ten minutes settling those books," he said, after a moment's further gruelling pause. "What do we do? Stand here and go on—looking at each other? Suppose I get on with the pictures. And you— Well, I don't really need any help in holding them."

She moved away. He was turning over the pictures now. He wasn't looking at her. She stood still again. Even her brain seemed to be still. Helpless and lifeless and numb. But they hadn't mentioned anything. They hadn't spoken of it at all. The front was still up, and they'd keep it up.

Hammond, grovelling among the books, turned as the door of the stock-room opened.

"Hullo, Sue!" he said again. "Get fed up with the pictures?"

She put her hand in his and clung to the comfort of it.

" I wanted to come in here with you. Can't I help you arrange your books ? "

" Surely. Go ahead. I say, I hadn't thought of this ! This is going to be great ! First time I've ever really enjoyed myself in here ! All right, undo that one, Sue, and hand 'em over ! "

Sue . . . Susan . . . Sue . . . Why had she let him call her that ?

The end of the week brought Mrs. Clifford, following hard on a letter. She had allowed them a month to settle down together, she said, and now she wanted to see them. She wanted to stay a few days, and watch the inner workings of that delightful shop.

But she was due for rather a shock when she arrived.

" You mean that Mr. Hunt's still living with you, Susan ? But I'd no idea—you've never mentioned him when you wrote."

" Well—here he still is."

" Naturally I imagined for a day or so, but not as long as this ! I don't really think it's quite nice, apart from anything else, you living up here with a couple of young men. I mean— Well, of course there's Johnny, but it seems rather strange. Doesn't it seem rather strange to you ? "

" Yes," Susan said. " It does seem rather strange —sometimes."

" You're looking different, Susan. You're looking more— No, I don't know how to explain it. Not ' older.' That's not the word. A little more mature, perhaps." She was a shade roguish. " I suppose that's just being married ? "

"I suppose so."

Not very communicative, Mrs. Clifford mused. There had never been much of the one-woman-to-another about Susan.

"And harking back to the question of this Mr. Hunt——" she went on.

"No, don't let's do that."

"What do you mean? Why not? He comes and plants himself back here——"

"Yes, I know, but——"

"Rubbing shoulders with you all day and every day——"

"Yes, I know!"

"Surely two young people in love want to be left on their own?"

Susan drew a deep breath.

"Yes, of course."

"Then why don't you see that he goes?"

"Because he does what he wants to do. And he happens to want to stay."

Mrs. Clifford patted at her waves in the glass.

"We'll see," she said. "We'll see."

They saw, later in the evening, when Hunt came in. After sitting for some time looking at him, Mrs. Clifford suddenly let forth. He eyed her without attempting any interruption. She began to falter in her fourth sentence, and trailed to an awkward end.

"We had discussed this, as a matter of fact," he told her, when she was silent again. "All three parties concerned. Will you smoke, Mrs. Clifford?"

"No, thank you." She wanted no cigarette of his.

"And none of us seemed keen on a move. You're from Clayle, I hear. Good fishing, I believe? I

always seem to be reading about competitions on the pier."

"Yes— No, it's not as good as it used——" She turned to Hammond. "You see, I was naturally expecting that back room to be spare by now, Johnny. I hardly thought I'd have to go out, to find one. It's rather a surprise for me, to have to start raking around——"

But of course she didn't have to, with Hammond's bed available. It was quite a simple matter for him to rig up his old mattress on the floor of the "junk" room.

There wasn't much watching of the inner workings of the shop. Not when Hunt was there. Mrs. Clifford spent her time in the living-quarters with Susan, overlooking the activities of the politely distant Ellis, or sitting out in the odd patches of sun in the back.

"I must get hold of a couple of nice books from some library or other," she said. "I always like to have one on hand. Perhaps Johnny would go along and pick them out for me. He knows all about books. He wouldn't mind, would he?"

"Oh, no, he wouldn't mind."

They went out to look at the shops. Mrs. Clifford was always keen on looking at shops.

"That was such a lovely week I spent here just before you were married, Johnny," she said, when they came back. "Shopping—and those wonderful evenings! We don't get that kind of thing down in Clayle."

Johnny saw to it that they had two more.

But there was something different about it all, she

decided. Susan herself was different, somehow. Why merely being married to a man like Johnny Hammond could put that strange look into her eyes sometimes, was beyond her completely. And then there was that Mr. Hunt. It wasn't at all the same.

She had meant to stay a week, but she cut the visit short at five days. The evening before she left, she went out on an expedition of her own, and returned with several parcels, just as "Hunt and Hammond" had closed.

"Things I'm taking home," she explained. "Oh, and I simply couldn't manage a pair of brass candlesticks I bought at Biddell's, in Oxford Street. They couldn't send until the morning, and it might be too late then. I want to get off sharply. I thought you might fetch them for me, Johnny. They don't shut till half-past six. I've got the bill here, for you."

At sight of Hunt's twirked eyebrows, Susan flushed red.

"The idea of a cab didn't appeal to you?" Hunt inquired.

"I don't think in terms of cabs, Mr. Hunt. I stick to buses."

"But of course they'll deliver early enough, if we phone them!" Susan said. It was becoming rather important. Johnny mustn't do this thing!

"Oh, what's it matter?" he said. "Only take a quarter of an hour. Pair of brass candlesticks. This the bill? H'm. Stung you a bit, haven't they? Well, see you all later."

Hunt and Susan looked at each other a moment, as he went out. Hunt's eyebrows were lowered again now, but she was still slightly flushed.

" He didn't mind, did he ? " observed Mrs. Clifford. " He's a nice boy. He never seems to mind anything."

" Oh, not a bit," Susan told her. Was it that glance of Hunt's that brought the sudden streak of impatience to her mind ? Impatience with Johnny, hurrying off post-haste for those wretched candlesticks. She found strange words forming in her brain. Not a bit. And if you went into the lumber room when he's there on that mattress, and trod all over him, I don't think he'd mind even that.

But when Mrs. Clifford's luggage had been taken to the station the next morning (and not so early after all, for she had dallied a lot over her packing) and he had settled her with magazines, he stood beside Susan watching the train out, and smiled down at her, and said, " Think she enjoyed it ? You wanted her to enjoy it, didn't you ? " And she felt a painful tugging within her, so that she lowered her eyes quickly, and nodded her head instead of answering. This was why she had been drawn to him. This was why she had married him. Kindness, selflessness, the willing hands. . . . Surely to heaven she couldn't start blaming him for it now !

The place seemed very still again. The thing that had been lurking in the background crept out once more. When she walked along the lower passages, she would hear the vague tones of Hunt's voice, or Hammond's laugh. They both struck at her with the same sharpness. How terribly strange it was that this could happen, and that Johnny lived with it and went blithely on, unaware. And Ellis . . . Ellis still padding about without even a shade of question in his

eyes, talking of floor polishes and new dusters. But he pulled her up now and then about her housekeeping lists. Usually over things " Mr. Hunt " had wanted. It seemed to be " Mr. Hunt " fifty times a day.

Hunt was mostly out in the evenings. He took Laura Buley sometimes, and never without mentioning the fact, either before or after. Hammond would make light remarks about it, and she tried not to look at Hunt while he answered them.

Laura Buley called her in one day as she passed. They had a cup of tea together in the back room. Laura was always friendly. Always very cool and sane too, Susan thought. She would have been glad of the respite of calling on her, except that she talked of Hunt.

" Must be funny to have him around you all the time," she said. " Get on with him all right now ? "

Susan gazed into her cup.

" Yes," she said. It was the easiest thing to say. The thing that led to least discussion.

" Anything wrong with him lately ? "

" No." She looked up slowly. " Why ? "

" Damn fine escort for an evening's entertainment. If he feels like sitting and looking like some savage image, and asking you to repeat something when you haven't said anything at all, and threatening to murder the band when he'd told you beforehand that he wanted a place with plenty of noise— Well, why does he have to up and take me out ? Why doesn't he stick at home ? "

" I don't know——" Susan said helplessly. " I couldn't say——"

Could she hurry away now ? Would it look rude ?

"I'm throwing a party to-morrow evening," Laura went on. She always "threw" her parties. "He'll be coming along. What about you two?"

"Oh, thank you, but Johnny's arranged to go out. A kind of long-standing engagement with someone." And thank heaven for it.

"But you can come yourself, can't you? Come along with friend Philip."

"Oh, thank you, Laura. I'd love to, but—I think I'll stay in and wait for Johnny."

"You and your Johnny——" Laura murmured.

She didn't know, either. No one knew.

Hammond, of course, made things terrible the next day by trying to insist that she went. He seemed to be coupling her with Hunt over and over. "You go with Hunt." "Hunt'll see you have a good time, won't you, Hunt?" "Even if you don't know Laura's lot, Hunt'll take you around. He knows 'em." "Hunt'll look after you."

"No, I'd rather stay in," she kept on saying. "I don't really want to go out."

What did it matter, whatever Hunt read into it? She couldn't keep up that farce of casualness for ever. It was growing too desperate for that.

And Hammond had to give in in the end. And he left five minutes before Hunt. She stayed on in the living-room, with the door shut, listening to the footsteps in the room overhead. Hunt would come down and go straight out.

She heard him walk down the stairs. She heard him halt. The door opened, and after a moment she raised her eyes. He stood framed there, one hand resting on the side.

"There'll be quite a crowd," he said. "Easy enough to lose yourself, as it were. Better than staying here alone, perhaps."

"No, thank you. I'll wait for Johnny. He said he'd be in by ten."

"Or you could go, and I'll stay in."

They were touching the fringes of it now. And yet not a word of it had passed between them.

"No, thank you. I'd rather stay."

He wouldn't keep there much longer, would he? Standing there just looking at her. . . . No, he drew the hand away. The door shut. And after a second or so, the outer door too.

She went up to her room and sat at the window and watched the movement in the street. She seemed very detached from it all, detached from the world, almost. All alone with her helpless ponderings. And in this there could be no turning to Johnny to soothe them away for her.

But he would be in soon. It wasn't so very long until ten. He would come up the stairs to find her, with a gay burst of talk. He would fluff up her hair and tell her about his evening, and tell her how glad he was to be back. It would be better when Johnny came in.

The dusk changed to darkness. She switched on the light and tried to read. It was not until twenty past ten that the street door opened and shut, and the footsteps came straight up the stairs.

She went to meet him. She called out as the silhouette of square shoulders came up towards her.

"Hullo, Johnny. I was just waiting up here."

She was close against him now, and he stood very

still. Then she was caught up in his arms. Hard, rigid arms that strained about her. Her heart gave a sudden sickening leap. Even before the hand had risen to touch her face. The hand that was not Johnny's.

And for a moment she could not pull away. She could do nothing but stand there, limply, in his hold.

He let her go. She could see his face, now that her eyes were more used to the dimness. A vague, pale face. She could hear his deep breaths. Hardly knowing what she did, she groped along the wall for the switch. And then he spoke, jerkily, breathlessly.

"Don't turn that on. Leave it."

He spoke again after awhile.

"When I came in—I thought he was here. I got tired of it next door, and I—thought he was here. Came up to keep out of the way——"

He turned.

"I'll go out again. A fine night for a walk——"

He was going back down the stairs. She stood with her hand on the banister knob, trembling.

The clatter of the street door again. But he hadn't gone, yet. It was Hammond's voice that crashed upon her ears.

"What ho, Hunt. Back early, aren't you? Going out again? I say, anything wrong?"

She couldn't hear an answer.

"What's wrong, Hunt? Have a row with Laura, or something?"

Still no answer. The street door opened and closed yet again.

Susan went back to the bedroom, and sat down on her bed. She was still trembling. But by the time

Hammond had been into the living-room and come out again, she had made her effort at composure. When he came charging up the stairs she was stooping and busying herself with one of her shoes.

"Hullo, turning in already?" he said.

"Yes, I felt a bit tired. I'd been sitting up here reading." She kept her head bent. She was attacking the other shoe now.

"Haven't been lonely or anything, have you?" He sat down beside her and pulled her back with his arm around her. She wanted to crumple up against him, so that he put his other arm round her too, and his face against hers. How could she want to turn to him, after the thing that had just happened? What was wrong with her? But Hunt's sudden grasp had been an ecstasy that had terrified her. And Johnny's . . . just a comfort that helped her to forget it.

No, she might give way too much. He might begin to wonder. Even Johnny. She must keep on talking. She had managed quite well up to now.

"Oh, no, I haven't been lonely," she said. "It wasn't for long."

She did rest her cheek against his shoulder just for a second. Then she stood up and began to draw her dress over her head.

"What's the matter with Hunt?" he asked her. "Did he happen to say anything to you about it?"

She pulled the dress free and arranged it on a hanger, with her back half turned to him.

"No. He just came in—well, just a few minutes before you did."

"Something or other next door, I suppose."

"I suppose so."

Horrible to have to lie to him. It was all horrible . . . all of it.

She lay staring at the window after she had crept into bed. She made no attempt to go to sleep. Neither, apparently, did Hammond, when he finally turned in too. He moved now and then.

How long was it since Hunt had left? An hour? Two? She must keep still, or he would talk about it to her.

The key jabbed in the lock at last. Hammond slipped out to his feet and walked quietly through the door and switched on the light in the passage. So concerned he was, always, over other people's troubles.

Hunt watched him as he came down the stairs.

"You're all right, aren't you, Hunt? No bad news, or anything? Was it a row with Laura?"

Hunt turned away from him, then turned back. His face was calmly set now. As he answered, it was a bare foot away from Hammond's.

"Yes," he said, with a peculiar kind of distinctness, "it was a row with Laura. You don't need to ask it again."

Hammond went back to the bedroom, and heard Susan's head move on the pillow.

"Didn't know he cared a couple of hoots about Laura," he muttered. "Hunt's a funny devil!"

Hunt had to wait a day or so, before he broached his fresh plans. One never knew. Hammond might begin to have a dim suspicion, if he were too quick about it now. Even Hammond. So he let two days go by, and he and Susan kept their eyes rigidly apart.

And he answered Hammond's solicitous questions with the greatest effort at patience he had ever made in his life. Yes, it was all O.K. with Laura. No, it hadn't been much of a row. He just got a bit fed up in there. Everything was all right.

And then, when they were alone in the shop together, he came to the point.

"I suppose you ought to be on your own after all, Hammond." He took a book down from a shelf, and idly studied it. "I've changed my mind. I'm clearing out."

"Oh, are you?" Hammond swung round from the window. "I say, that's decent of you, Hunt." He paused a second. "Of course, I thought you would, sooner or later. You know how it is— But it's decent of you, all the same."

"Yes, I'm being—very decent."

"This isn't because of what mother-in-law said, I suppose?"

"No." Hunt shot the book back. "I've been thinking of it for some time, really. I just lacked the energy to get going."

"You'll be all right, will you?"

"Yes." Hunt took down another book, and whirled the pages over. "Easy enough to get a couple of rooms and attendance. Needn't be far off."

"Of course, I'm sorry as far as you're concerned," Hammond told him. "You took the place over with me. And there's Ellis and everything——"

"Yes. No point in going into it all, though, is there?"

"It's decent of you, I mean."

"You said that, Hammond."

"Well, I'm saying it again. Decent of you to realize that Sue and I——"

"Oh, yes." Hunt snapped the book shut. "Anyway, it's too much of a crowd. It's a case of the extra one making all the difference. The same with in here. Could you manage to see to it that your wife stays out altogether in future?"

"What?" Hammond was surprised. "But damn it all, I thought you two were shaking down to each other by now!"

Hunt held the book tightly in one hand. Then he turned to the shelf again, and fitted it into line. He spoke as he did so.

"So we are, I suppose. But there's nothing your wife can do. So if you'd be good enough to see that she stays out altogether——"

"But she's all right in here. She doesn't come in much, anyway. Be a bit more reasonable over it, Hunt!"

Hunt did not look at him, in case his maddened impatience showed itself in his eyes. He went on fingering the books. More reasonable. My God! More reasonable! And have we acted so well, or are you merely the biggest fool in creation?

"Your wife herself——" he began.

"And for the lord's sake why all the formality? Why d'you keep on saying 'your wife'?"

Why *did* he keep on saying it? Drumming in those words. . . . It didn't help him much.

"Let's leave it!" he said. "Hand over that stock book, will you?"

Ellis spent all the afternoon investigating suitable

quarters for him. A very shaken Ellis, but too busy for many private thoughts of his own. He brought back three possible addresses, and Hunt selected the nearest, and went over to approve it. A converted flat, a hundred yards along a side turning. And attendance. Ellis had probed deeply into all that, with countless questions and cautions. A rather timid landlady was completely overpowered as Hunt walked in.

Ellis went ahead with preparations, and finally supervised the move. He packed Hunt's cases and carried them downstairs. It was on a Saturday evening, and Susan and Hammond were ready to go out. But "Let's see Hunt off first," Hammond had said. She stood in the living-room, staring out of the window, while he dashed up and down with odds and ends, and Ellis waited in the passage.

Then came a patch of quiet, and Hunt walked down and opened the living-room door.

Susan turned. He stood still for awhile, without speaking, then came forward until he was within a couple of yards of her.

"Hammond and Ellis are taking some stuff along," he said. "I thought I might have just a word before I go."

She glanced up at him briefly, and away. But his gaze lingered upon her. It ran over the brown hair and the small tense face. It passed on to the hands that were gripped tightly round her belt. It rose to her face again.

"I'm sorry about—anything that's happened," he said, breaking another silence. "Anyway, I'm doing what I can."

"Yes, you're doing what you can——"

"I ought to have done it before, I suppose. But I didn't want to impress it upon myself that there was the need for it. I thought if I went on— Well, I'm doing it now. I'll still be in there during the day, of course. I can't think of a solution to that yet."

"No." She looked suddenly up at him again. She stared up at him and raced on. "Oh, no, you can't break away from that! You can't break it all up! Not just because of . . . me!"

She drew in her breath rather sharply. They were speaking of it now. They were touching the heart of it now.

"I don't know——" he told her. "But I don't want to break it up. It's meant a lot to me. And there's Hammond. He'd need a bigger excuse than I'm capable of thinking out at the moment."

"Yes, he might—— He mustn't——"

"No." Hunt moved suddenly, walking a few paces here and there. He stopped again. "I asked him to try to keep you out of there. That was a mistake, saying it to him. But you haven't been in, these last few days. Stay out altogether, Susan. I can't keep watching that door all the time, or I'll think of nothing else."

"Yes, I'll stay out." Susan. . . . It had never sounded like that, before he said it.

"If you do that, it practically cuts out any meeting at all, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

There was another pause. Endless, it seemed.

"I'll go now, shall I? No point in—— Yes, I'll go now."

He walked to the door, but she knew that he would turn there. He did.

"Good-bye, then," he said.

"Good-bye," she answered.

CHAPTER X

THE STORM BREAKS

CUTTING out any meeting at all . . . that seemed likely to be a simple enough matter, now that she left the shop alone. Hammond had called in at the new quarters once, but she had made a passable excuse.

"Oh, I don't know—— You go by yourself, Johnny. Surely you can look in on your friends without me always tagging on. And I wanted to finish this book."

The car was no further problem. Hunt had had his way, and now there were two of them. Hammond retained the old one, paying off Hunt's share of it at a decidedly generous figure. Hunt bought a fresh one.

No question of a meeting at all, for nearly a fortnight. She did not even see him. But it was as though she almost saw him, all the time. She heard snatches of his voice. She heard his footsteps. And Ellis was becoming more amiably communicative with her (she was the mistress of the house now, after all) and usually on the same subject. "Mr. Hunt was saying a moment ago——" "As I said to Mr. Hunt——" Mr. Hunt . . . Mr. Hunt . . .

She went out a good deal more than she had done before. She visited museums and picture galleries and an occasional cinema. She walked strenuously in Hyde Park. She even went down to Clayle on her own for

a couple of days. Anything to try to keep away, while he was there.

And then one day she walked in at the street door and found him in the passage. He was groping for something in the pocket of his overcoat.

He drew his hand out. They stood gazing at each other as she slowly closed the door. He looked back at the coat and mechanically reached out to it again.

But the door through to the shop was ajar, and they could hear Hammond's faint whistle, and his footsteps. Ellis was moving about in the living-room. They couldn't just stare and pass on in silence.

"Haven't seen you for some days," Hunt observed. His hand had hooked itself over the pocket now, and remained there quite still. "Been for a walk?"

"Yes, in the Park." Her eyes rested on the hand, and his chest and his shoulders, and tried not to rise to his again. "It's a bit cold. Proper autumn weather. But the trees are looking wonderful."

"Quite exhilarating, I should think—walking to-day."

"Yes, very."

She racked her brains for another opening. He watched her and found it himself.

"I hear you looked in at the Gaugin show in Bond Street yesterday. Pretty good, wasn't it?"

So he heard about her, in the same way that she heard about him. Did he feel it the same as she did?

"Yes, awfully good. I'm sort of educating myself up to his kind of stuff. I thought it was—awfully good. That one just opposite the door——"

"Yes. Very fine." Hunt didn't remember which one it was. The wind has caught your cheeks, he

thought, and touched them up with pink. Your mouth's like a poppy. I've never seen a woman's mouth lovelier than yours. Yes, keep your eyes away. I can't stand the sight of them too. In that close suit, your form's enough to torture a man to death. And I haven't seen you for nearly two weeks. . . .

As Hammond came breezing out of the shop to join in, he drew a box of cigarettes from the pocket of the coat, snapped open his case and began to refill it.

But at least the evenings were free from the risk of any encounter. Susan spent her days just waiting for the evenings. It was quiet and still then, and she sat in a deep arm-chair by the fire with Hammond in another, opposite her. Or sometimes he sprawled on the floor with his head resting against her knees. Soothing and comfortable . . . if only she could dissociate him from the whole thing, if only she could stop herself from feeling that every thought of Hunt was like a blow at him.

He almost startled her once, when he spoke out of a long silence. His head was flat upon the seat of her chair, and he was gazing up at the ceiling.

" Why don't you ever look in on us during the day now ? " he said.

" But I'm doing other things, Johnny."

" Is it because of Hunt ? "

She looked down at his face. He was still gazing up at the ceiling. His hand, by his side, was playing with the edge of the rug. For a second she could not answer. The horrible significance those words could have held, if she hadn't known exactly what he meant !

And now a straight question like that wanted " yes "

or "no." And a blunt lie to him made her shrink inside. But perhaps she could walk around it.

"He might have sort of started it in the beginning," she said. "My slackening off there, I mean. I knew he wasn't keen on it. And then I got less keen on it myself. I couldn't really do anything, and it seemed rather absurd, when I was once over the novelty of it. And now I'm doing other things, and—usually it just doesn't occur to me."

"You don't want to come?"

"I think you're better on your own. And I like going out and—doing other things."

"I wondered if Hunt had spoken to you. But of course if he had you wouldn't have let that affect you, would you?"

There seemed no way out of the direct negative now.

"No, of course not."

Hammond sat up and took hold of the poker, and prodded at the fire.

"As long as you're doing what you like," he said. "I'll tell him he needn't bother to look at the door so much, then."

They watched the flames shooting up. She formed several answers in her mind, and in the end left them unsaid. So he still watched the door!

Hammond put the poker down and turned round to her.

"You *are* doing what you like, aren't you?" he said. He put his hands over hers and held them very tightly. "You're happy here, aren't you, and everything's going on fine?"

She bent her head suddenly and rested her cheek against the hands.

" Yes," she said. " Everything's going on—wonderfully."

She felt a light touch on her hair, as though he were brushing his lips upon it.

" You know what you said—— Things grow, if you wait——"

" Yes. Yes, they do——" It was better with her head bent like this. It was easier when she could feel his hands.

" You're happy with me, then ? "

" Very happy, Johnny——"

She heard him draw a deep breath after awhile. He raised her head up and set it back against her cushion. He stretched himself out at full length again. And now his face was not turned up to the ceiling. It was propped against her knee. His hand reached out for one of hers again. He lay blinking into the fire.

It was almost a matter of caution for her, now, to move from one door to another. Before she slipped out for her spells of escape, she found herself looking to see that all was clear. It was becoming grotesque—this obsession that they must not meet. She wondered many times how much longer the thing could be kept at bay.

And one evening when Hammond was out on another call, she went in to see Laura Buley, and Hunt was there. She heard him mentioned casually as Laura took her along the passage.

" Philip's just looked in, *and* in one of those damned moods of his. Thank heaven you're here to take it off, or I'd have asked him to clear out."

Susan went on, although she was on the point of turning and hurrying away. But at least she was prepared, by the time Laura pushed open the door. Hunt was not, entirely. A tense apprehension in his face changed to a narrowed stare.

"I've given him up," Laura went on. "But perhaps he'll be able to muster a courtly grace or two for you."

She brought out cigarettes, and Susan took one, and Hunt too. He proffered a match, and their eyes met for a second over the top of it.

"But I'll be throwing you both out in about half an hour," Laura observed. "Got an appointment."

They sat down, and they talked. Laura led, and they followed. Hunt's gaze played about Susan's hands, and rose now and then to her mouth. She kept hers mostly upon his swinging right shoe. Their thoughts were the same. Only half an hour . . .

The change-around of Laura's furniture . . . the cold snap in the weather, that made stockings a regrettable necessity again . . . the prospects of trade for the coming season . . . they discussed them all. Susan made her answers as full as she could, if a trifle vague now and then. Hunt spoke mostly in monosyllables. And Laura began to wish that she had set a time-limit of a quarter of an hour, instead of half.

She jerked up to her feet suddenly with a murmured remark about having a few words with the help. As the door closed upon her, Susan and Hunt stood up together, and glanced at each other, and paused.

"Well?" he said after a moment. "Shall I leave first, or will you?"

"If you would, then——"

He swung round towards the door. But when his fingers were upon the handle, she spoke again.

"Just a minute—I just wanted to tell you——"

She wished now that she had let him go. He stood eyeing her.

"Yes?" he said.

She went on finally,

"Johnny happened to say you keep looking at the door, when you're in there with him. He's noticed it."

"Oh, he's noticed it? Smart of him."

"Don't speak of him—like that."

"I don't want to speak of him at all, and I don't want to think of him. And as a result of that, I'm thinking of him every flaming minute. Is that all you wanted to say? Just that he's noticed me looking at the door?"

"Yes. There's no need to be afraid I'll come in."

"I haven't been afraid you'd come in. I've been hoping you'd come in."

Susan ran her hands along the back of a chair, closed them around it. Laura's footsteps hurried up the stairs and moved across the upper room.

"Strange, isn't it?" he said. "After telling you to stay out?"

She made no answer.

"After being driven nearly mad with you all these weeks, to start wishing you'd come through that door again——"

"Don't look at me like that!" she broke in. "Why do you look at me like that?" Her voice faded at the end into a mere breath.

"How am I looking at you?" he asked, after a pause. "I'd be interested to know."

She was silent again for a moment. Then,

" You were going, just now. I called you back, but only to say that. Couldn't you——"

His hand dropped down from the door. They both stood quite still. Then Susan made a sudden movement away from him, and in the next instant he moved too. The chair was twisted aside. She watched him coming towards her. A desperate cry seemed to sound within her brain . . . " Johnny ! " She tried to speak aloud, to stop him. She spread her hands out against the wall behind her. He caught at her wrists and drew them wide. And no word was possible now, for his mouth was pressed hard to hers.

She tried to struggle free, but he loosed his grip on her wrists and held his hands around her head. And then she ceased to struggle and her form became limp, and he caught her closely against him. The room faded into nothingness. Johnny, Laura, the shop . . . they had all gone. His arms were tense and hard and quite unyielding. The fierce pressure of his mouth set her brain reeling dizzily. One wildly wandering hand closed upon the sleek blackness of his hair, and slid down in an unconscious caress. . . .

He raised his head, and his eyes blazed into hers. Dimly she wondered what lay in her own, as she looked back at him.

She heard his voice. It was very near, very low. A voice she hardly recognized.

" If you knew how much I've been wanting to do that—— Your lovely mouth——"

She put her hands up against his chest, to try to press herself away. But when he closed one of his own around them, they became still again.

"But you did know," he went on. "You've known all the time, haven't you? I've seen you looking at me—— I've watched your eyes changing. You weren't much more than a child when you first came. Wide child's eyes. They used to annoy me rather, I remember. But they've changed. There's something in them that wasn't there when he first brought you back."

She moved her hands again, upon his chest. He held them there tightly. His grip seemed to set something gripping at her heart too. Fierce fingers gripping at her heart.

"Why have they changed?" he asked, his voice still low. "They didn't change for him."

She pulled back against him.

"Let me go——" she said.

He took her wrists once more. She was frightened at her helplessness, and yet her mind seemed aflame with it. He drew her close again. He tipped her face back and spoke with his eyes upon hers.

"Keep still. Don't you realize that struggling makes it worse? All this struggling—all this avoiding even the sight of each other—doesn't it make it a hundred times worse? Don't you think if he knew how we'd choked ourselves up so as to keep him still laughing on the same as ever—don't you think he'd allow us a few minutes on our own, a few minutes without any need of—struggling? He'd be reasonable enough for that, wouldn't he? He's always been pretty generous——"

"You can't speak of him——"

"A few minutes on our own, Susan, because we can't keep on trying to fight it off for ever. Come round to my rooms and talk to me. We'll talk it all over. And then perhaps we'll find it easier."

Laura's footsteps moved again, and he let her draw away. But they still stood looking at each other.

"All this hemming in——" he muttered. "Seeing you flash by in the passage once a week, say, or pass the window once a fortnight. Seeing you in here alone for a split second, before she decides to walk in again——"

"I couldn't go there with you——"

"Why not? We're supposed to be friends now, aren't we?"

"But now——"

"Surely to God we can talk about it!"

Laura's footsteps ran down the stairs and he flung away, his hands thrust deep in his pockets, his eyebrows drawn down, his eyes gleaming slits. She pushed at the door and walked in. Susan stood with her back half turned, groping down to the chair for her bag. Something to do . . . something to hold. . . .

Voices began again. Mad voices in a mad world.

"Sorry I had to dash off like that. Didn't mind, did you?"

"No."

"What's the matter now? Been having a row?"

"No."

Hunt began to walk, flapping his cigarette-case between his hands.

"Look at him!" Laura said. "Just look at him!"

But in that second, Hunt turned his head to glance at her, and she became silent and very still. He stopped, and put the case back into his pocket. His eyes moved to Susan's, and held them for a paralysing moment, then met Laura's again.

"Come over and see my rooms," he said. "Both of you."

Susan tried to find an answer, but let it pass. Laura was already speaking, anyway. She spoke slowly, as though she were thinking out each word.

"I told you I'd got to go out."

"In half an hour. You've only had twenty minutes."

"That means I'd have to leave again a few minutes after I got there."

"Leave, then."

"Why do you want me to come at all?"

"Just to see them."

"You don't."

His hand on the door-knob, Hunt paused to glance at her again.

"Just to keep Susan in countenance, then. She's coming along to see them too. She might like it better if we made a party of it."

"There's no need," Susan said suddenly. Her face was calm now, almost set, as she adjusted her hat in the glass. "We don't want to bother her. I'm not as silly as all that. I'll go along with you——"

Hunt pulled open the door, and Laura walked through it.

"I'll come too," she said.

They were all silent on the way. Then, as they went into the house, Laura began to talk. She'd heard about it from Johnny, of course. Johnny had thought it all quite decent. Was he thinking of looking in this evening, did Hunt know? Did he know what he happened to be doing with himself?

"Who?" Hunt asked in polite inquiry, as he opened

the upper door to let them through. There was an edge to his voice.

"Johnny."

"So I gathered. Seems to be rather on your brain, doesn't he?"

"He does a bit."

"He's rather on mine too. He always is. But we needn't have every sentence peppered with his name, need we?"

They looked at each other for awhile. Susan had walked on into Hunt's living-room, and stood staring down from the window. Laura joined her, and they gazed down together. Susan glanced sideways at her. She dreaded doing so, but she did. Laura's eyes were pensively fixed. She seemed ill at ease. Nothing more.

When she had gone, Hunt closed the door and strolled back. He walked up and down the room.

"Sit down, Susan," he said, as he went.

She sat down in a deep, square arm-chair, her hands curved over the arms.

"She's an irritating woman at times," he said. "But she has one big virtue. She minds her own business."

Susan rested her head back against the top of the chair. It was almost beyond thinking or worrying about . . . all of it.

"Do you mean she—— You mean——"

"Probably. It doesn't matter."

He went on walking. She closed her eyes, listening to his measured steps. Then she opened them again, and watched him. The slow swing of his shoulders, the strong lines of his half-turned face against the light.

Too grotesque and fantastic to realize or think about.

. . . He had held her and kissed her, and spoken to her in a voice she had never heard before. She sat in his chair in his room, in a silence that they had no need to break. The front was down, and they could not put it up again.

He turned his eyes upon her now and then. They had resented her, those eyes. They had glared at her, mocked at her, laughed at her. And they, too, had changed now. . . .

He spoke after awhile.

"Are you waiting for me to apologize for what happened back there? Is that what you think I ought to do?"

She moved her head against the back of the chair. Slightly, from side to side.

He came and stood in front of her. He paused a long time there, looking at her, until she wanted to hide her face in her arms.

"Well?" he said. "We came here to talk, didn't we?"

He smiled at her, faintly. A smile that did not touch the strain in his eyes. But the merest hint of it was enough to transform his face, as it had always done. That frightening charm. . . .

He sat down on the wide arm of her chair, facing her. One hand rested on the other side, barring her across. She seemed surrounded by him. She was aware of nothing, ahead of her, but his level eyes. And it was when she realized that she was almost a prisoner in that chair that she put her hands on his arm and tried to move it. His fingers closed a little firmer.

"Please——" she said. "Mr. Hunt——"

She halted at that. His smile crept back for a moment.

"Philip——" she said. She drew her hands away and held them stiffly at each side. "I came here with you because—things were too hopeless to leave as they were. You said it would be easier. You said we came here to talk."

"We're going to talk."

"Not like this."

"Yes, like this."

She swallowed. Her throat felt tight and hot.

"Farther away from me——"

"As near as I can get to you, Susan. Feeling just for once that I can sit and look at you—at ease. No one watching me. No one going to burst in any second——"

"You said it would be easier! You're making it harder!"

"No, it's you who are making it harder. You're struggling again. Bringing out all your defences, and thinking you can deal with the thing that way. Well, you can't, now. We can talk of what we're going to do about it, but keeping up the arm's-length business, when even our very minutes together may be numbered—— No, you're not going to do it."

Her hands fastened around his arm again, but quietened there. He leant closer towards her. Her eyes gazed widely into his. She sat as still as a statue.

"We can talk of what we're going to do," he said. His voice was low again. "But not just for a moment, because we know what we'll say, don't we? I'm going to forget that for a moment. I'm just going to look at you."

She turned her head suddenly sideways, away from his eyes. His hand dropped and slipped around her. She was caught up against his chest again, her head held tightly in the crook of his arm. And it was longer, this time, before he raised his own. . . .

She had begun fiercely to struggle again, but she was still by then, half dazed, half delirious, her heart racing sickeningly.

" I didn't know I'd ever get it like this," he said at last. " It's almost beyond understanding. All at once, like this——"

" Yes, all at once——"

" I can't pretend I've never—made love to a woman before. I have, when I felt like it. But it's never meant anything. Not like this. This has never happened before. I thought it never would."

He looked down at her ruffled head.

" And with you——" he said. " Strange it should be with you. Your type——"

" Childish ? " she cut in, almost under her breath.

" Young. Young and virginal. He's left you very untouched."

She moved again sharply, and he let her go. She sank back against the chair, and he drew himself up on the arm. He crossed one knee over the other, and clasped his hands tightly around them. He did not look at her now.

" We were going to talk," he said. " Yes, we were going to talk about Hammond, weren't we ? "

Her face was very pale.

" No——" she whispered. " No, we can't talk about him——"

" He's rather an important item, isn't he ? "

"But—there's nothing to say about him. We're not going to do anything to hurt him——"

Hunt's mouth twisted very slightly.

"No," he said after awhile. "Not even anything to say about him. I suppose there isn't." He was staring down at the floor. "He may go through life simply asking to be taken advantage of—simply spreading himself out around your feet so that you've got nothing else to do but step on him——"

"But not in any way that—matters!"

"No, not in a way like this. He's never asked for this. I wish to God he had. If only he hadn't got that manner of his, that breezing around as though he's in a kind of heaven on earth—— If only he'd started ill-treating you, or neglecting you, or being unfaithful to you——" He broke off with a hint of a laugh. "Well, we'll leave him out of it, if you want to. Nothing to say about him, after all——"

They were silent awhile, and he went on staring at the floor. He spoke finally without moving his eyes.

"Of course I'll have to get out. There's nothing else for it. I can't make a dash at it straight away. There'd have to be arrangements made, anyhow. But later, when I can bring it up with him——"

"But you don't want to go. You'll hate leaving it all!"

"Oh, I'll hate it like poison. I'll resent it, and him, and you. It was all my idea. He only came into it because I suggested it. My idea from the start. He doesn't care about it as I do. He'd have let you go ahead and do your worst with those curtains and smocks, and turn the whole thing into a joke. Yes, I'll hate it all right. But there it is."

"I'm sorry——" she murmured, half incoherently. "And I'm sorry I tried to turn the whole thing into a joke——"

"I don't know how long I'll be here. Not long, I suppose. I want to see you alone now and then, while I am. Even though we *are* hemmed in all round, I've got to see you sometimes before I go."

"No, we can't! We can't—do this again!"

He turned his eyes upon her. He looked at her in silence until her heart began to race madly once more.

"Why not?" he said. "Too respectable? Too afraid?"

She furrowed her hands into the cushioned seat.

"You can put it how you like. We're trying to keep Johnny's name out of it, but it won't stay out. Johnny——"

"Could you spare a stray thought for me, do you think? I'm leaving all this behind, and leaving you behind. Aren't I doing enough for him?"

He paused again, and she made no answer.

"When I get clear away, it'll be different," he said. "You won't be there. You won't be just out of reach, just out of sight, just on the other side of the next wall—— While you are, I'm going to see you sometimes, alone. If I don't, it'll get beyond me, and I'll end in making a scene with him."

"You wouldn't do that! Philip, you wouldn't do that!"

"I wouldn't—in my right senses."

Into the next silence there came the shrill of the telephone bell in the far corner. They both stiffened slightly with the shock of it. Hunt rose to his feet and walked across.

"Hullo?" he said.

She saw his fingers close, against his side. But his voice did not change.

"Yes, I stayed in after all. At least, I looked in at Laura's and came back——" The fingers opened and closed again. "Yes, do. . . . Your wife's already here, as it happens. . . . Yes, she came on from Laura's, to have a look round. . . . Yes. . . . See you in a minute, then. . . . Good-bye."

He replaced the telephone. Susan had risen too, and stood waiting for him to speak. When he did, he was short and to the point.

"Sit down again," he said.

"But is Johnny coming here?"

"Yes, he's on his way. That doesn't mean you've got to escape out at the back, does it? It turned me over a bit to hear his voice suddenly like that, but there's no reason on earth why you shouldn't be here. He's wanted you to come before, hasn't he?"

"It just seems strange! Everything seems strange and awful!"

"Sit down. That's it. Now pull yourself together. You'll have to learn to get a proper grip on yourself, for occasions like this. We'll both have to learn that. We'll have to have this threesome a good many times before we're through, no doubt. And by the way, while I've still got the time to say it, listen to this. It's no use trying to talk to you here, apparently. To-morrow let's get out somewhere for awhile."

"No, we can't——"

"Yes. You remember that place where you had tea that day, and where I came to fetch you? I've been thinking of it ever since. We'll run down there again.

We'll have to dissemble a bit, unfortunately, for the sake of Hammond's peace of mind. Nothing's to touch that, is it? So you can go out with any excuse you like, during the afternoon, and I'll be leaving round about four, myself, with another. And I'll be waiting with the car in Portman Square, say, soon after five past."

A hurried stride was coming along the pavement below. It came in at the gate. A moment later, and the main door had opened and shut, and the steps clattered up towards them.

"No——" Susan breathed.

"Yes," Hunt answered.

CHAPTER XI

KATRINE

HUNT was leaning against the mantelpiece as the door of the room swung open and Hammond came in. He stopped for a second just inside. Then his smile began to play as usual about his mouth. He was bareheaded, and a lock of hair straggled across his forehead.

"Thought you'd come along here, did you?" he said. He walked forward and sat on the arm of Susan's chair. He sat half facing her, just as Hunt had been doing a few minutes before. In heaven's name why did he have to do that? He smiled down at her again, and she found herself smiling back.

"Yes, as I'd never been before," she said.

"Laura came along too, but she had to clear off again," Hunt observed.

"Oh, did she? What d'you think of it here, Sue?"

"Quite decent."

"Laura like it too?"

"Yes, she thought it was—quite decent."

Hammond looked around the room himself. He seemed a little detached. He brought his eyes back to her. Then he flung one knee over the other and groped in his pocket for a cigarette, and lit it.

"Didn't realize you were here, when I phoned through," he said.

"We came on from Laura's."

"Yes, so Hunt mentioned. Funny to find you here like old friends. Things happen that way sometimes."

Hunt eyed him, still leaning against the mantelpiece. Very cool, Hunt looked. Very master of himself and the situation, Susan thought. Hammond had smoothed back the lock of hair now, but his head was still rather wind-swept. Why hadn't he changed that inevitable check shirt before he went out? She let the thoughts pass at random through her head. The more she thought at random, the better.

But another began to impress itself upon her, with more force. Hammond was kicking his heel against the side of the chair. Quite lightly, but steadily. He plunged one hand into his pocket and drew it out again. He flicked his ash abstractedly on to the floor. He was on edge. Only slightly, perhaps, but—just enough to be noticeable.

Susan tried to keep still and calm. She tried to control the sudden racing of her breath. She had to fight down the impulse to cling to his arm and cry out to him, "It's all right, Johnny! There's nothing to worry you! It's all right!" She looked across at Hunt. He hadn't moved at all.

"What way do you mean?" he said.

"What? Oh, you know—— You live nose to nose with someone, and scrap like a cat and dog. And then you split up, and everything's O.K. That's fine, anyway."

He inhaled at his cigarette, and blew out a stream of smoke.

"I say—— I'm sorry!" he muttered. He groped for his case again. "Sorry I just lit up without handing these around! I forgot——"

Susan declined, with another tight little smile. Hunt took one. Hammond's heel went on kicking against the chair until she could have screamed to him to stop.

"Didn't you say you wanted to come along to see me about something or other?" Hunt asked. "I gathered the impression that you were going to let it out when you got here, sort of thing."

"Oh, yes. Couldn't say anything over the phone because she was there with me. Bit awkward. . . . Wondered if you were in, so that you might lend a hand——"

Surprise shot through Susan's agitation now. She?

"Good job you're here, Sue, because I can get ahead with all the explanations at once, now. Much better than having you walk straight into it there, without knowing. When you have either to do a thing, or not do it, on the spot as it were, and you decide to do it—well, it's apt to be a bit awkward if you can't explain well in time——"

"Explaining certainly helps," Hunt remarked.

"Well, I'm doing it. You know that girl who sat for Peckers once or twice . . . Oh, you know the one —fairly tall—long, straight black hair——"

"The one who wanted him to marry her?"

"Good God, no! Long black hair, tallish and slender, lazy kind of eyes——"

"H'm. What about her, anyway?"

"I ran into her this evening. She's had some bad luck. Been ill, and what not, and got cleaned out of cash. Nothing in the way of prospects just at the minute. I—er——" He gave a rather more pronounced kick at the chair, and suddenly stopped. He looked down at Susan. "I took her home," he said.

There was a pause. That's all it was, she thought wildly. That's all he's been fidgeting about. Her whole body unconsciously relaxed.

"You know what I mean?" Hammond went on. "To our place. I couldn't give her money. She's not that sort. But I could say, 'Come on and pig in with us until you find your feet.' So I did."

He still gazed down at her.

"You don't mind, do you, Sue? I've been worried to death, since, in case you would. There didn't seem much else to be done, but if you don't care about it——I don't want to do anything you don't care about——"

She looked back at him, but she was aware of Hunt's faint smile, all the same. Her sense of blind relief had passed. She could think more clearly of the matter in hand. Something Johnny wanted to do. Something she could do for him, by not crippling him with objections.

"No, I don't mind," she said. "Of course I don't mind, Johnny."

He looked at her a long moment more. Then he stood up.

"Fine!" he said. "And I told you I could do with a hand, Hunt, didn't I? It's with getting the bed up, and what not, in the spare room. Let's get going, shall we?"

On the way back, Susan's thoughts cleared yet a little more. She walked between them with Hammond's flow of talk passing over her head. Long black hair, she mused. Tallish and slender. Lazy kind of eyes.

She saw her, as Hammond pushed open the living-room door. The tall slenderness was making the most of itself in a swathed kind of dress of mellow green. The long black hair was as glossy as a seal, severely parted, and bound at the back of her neck. The lazy eyes held a slow kind of wistfulness.

"You're being so kind to me," she said, as they walked in.

Hammond kept up the flow of talk. Not at all. This was his wife, and they'd all rub along fine. She'd seen Hunt before, of course, hadn't she?

Susan had a white hand held out to her.

"You're so kind," she was told.

She shook the hand, and shyly declared what a pleasure it was. She was feeling rather overpowered.

"Let's see, I can't quite remember your name——" Hammond said.

"Katrine."

"Oh, of course. Yes."

"Unless you'd rather we used your private one," Hunt suggested.

"That's not so pretty," she told him with a smile. "No, I'd rather you used Katrine."

"Well, let's get ahead with that room, Hunt," Hammond said. "Get the bed up, and everything."

"I'm afraid I'm being a great nuisance to you," observed Katrine.

"Nuisance? Of course you're not! Don't worry about that. Don't worry about anything!"

The words lingered in Susan's mind, after they had gone. It seemed almost strange to hear Johnny saying that to someone else.

They sat down and smiled at each other.

"It's wonderful of you to take it like this," Katrine said.

"But I'm only too pleased."

"So kind. I didn't know what you'd be like. I could only be sure of *him*. You see, I'd met him before——"

"Yes. Yes, I see."

"And when you feel things closing in upon you"—Katrine closed her hands in upon her shapely breast, in picturesque illustration—"well, you know how it is——"

"Yes. As a matter of fact I do know, quite well."

"You're so understanding. There didn't seem anything left to do except just ask, on the off-chance, if I could serve in his shop."

"You—you asked that too!" Susan broke out, wide-eyed.

Katrine looked puzzled.

"I wanted to be of some use, if I could——"

"Yes—I see——"

"He didn't want that. He said he didn't want to have me working under him, or under Mr. Hunt. But he insisted on bringing me back, just the same, and—well, you know how it is——"

"Yes—I know——"

Hammond came hurtling down the stairs.

"I say, Sue, how do we go for sheets and stuff?"

"In the cupboard," she answered, almost mechanically. "I'll come and get them."

"So awfully kind——" floated out behind her.

The bed was assembled and made, and Hammond carried up Katrine's case. He ushered her up himself,

afterwards, with a hand under her arm, and wanted to know if it were quite to her liking.

"You settle yourself and stop worrying," he said. "Everything'll be all right."

There certainly wasn't room for all of them there, especially with Hammond leaping around like a live wire in his efforts to be of service. Susan went down again, and heard Hunt follow her. They went into the living-room.

"He'll never get it out of his system," Hunt remarked. "He brought back a stray kitten once, and we had the devil's own job with it before we found it a home. Most unconventional in its habits, it was. And there was some organ-grinder's monkey he bought, because it had a chill on its chest, or something. I remember Ellis had almost begun to gibber himself by the time we got rid of that. If someone left a baby on the doorstep, I know damn well he'd take it in and bring it up."

He turned his eyes upon her face, and kept them there a moment.

"And then, of course, there was——" He drew his gaze away again, and sauntered across to the fireplace and back. "Oh, other odd cases of it," he went on. "If it isn't one thing, it pretty soon has to be another. And now we have—Katrine, whatever her name is."

She wanted to ask him why he had paused, cut his words short. But she could not bring herself to do it. She knew that he would evade an answer, in any case. And she knew what he had meant. "Then, of course, there was—you." Someone to rescue and fuss around because it was in his nature to keep on rescuing and fussing around something or someone. And if she

hadn't been first in the field to play upon his feelings with her unhappiness . . . if Katrine, with that slow loveliness of hers had been a few months earlier . . .

Oh, madness . . . crass stupidity . . . hysteria ! Had the turbulence of the evening gone to her head ?

Hunt walked across to the fireplace again. He spoke with his back half turned to her.

" To-morrow in Portman Square, soon after four ——"

" No——" she muttered. " No ! "

He did not move.

" Why not ? " he said. " Think I'm going to run away with you ? I've just got to see you alone, that's all."

In the pause that followed, they could hear Hammond's earnest hurryings backwards and forwards.

" Well ? " he said. " You'll come ? Yes, you'll come."

" I told you——"

" Alone, Susan. It's little enough to ask, isn't it ? Just while we can——"

" Making excuses to him—— Slipping out like that—— Oh, it would be terrible ! "

" Tell him what you're going to do, then. Or let me."

She stared at him.

" You don't mean that ! You don't, do you ? "

" No, I don't mean that. But don't get me thinking about it. Be reasonable, can't you ? "

Hammond's voice sounded in reassurances on the upper landing. Down he came again. Hunt swore under his breath.

" Looks quite comfortable up there," Hammond said,

as he walked in. "Good job I happened to run into her, wasn't it?"

"Or that she happened to run into you," Hunt answered. "She knew you were calling on Peckers again this evening, I suppose?"

"May have done." Hammond glanced at him. "Good job, anyway, wasn't it?"

"Oh, yes."

Hammond put his hand suddenly over Susan's, as it lay on the table. So suddenly that she almost started.

"You don't mind, do you, Sue?" he said. "Not really?"

She shook her head at him, and managed to smile again.

"Come up and see what you think of it all now," he said.

She went through the door with him, and heard Hunt move restlessly in the background. And in the passage outside, Hammond slipped an arm round her and drew her hard against him, and tipped back her chin against his shoulder. And over the shoulder she saw the rigid form of Hunt, through the living-room door.

"You're so sweet about it all——" Hammond murmured. And he bent his head and kissed her mouth. But just before he did it, she saw the look that leapt into Hunt's eyes, and the wave of blood that swept up to flush his very forehead.

They went up the stairs together, she and Hammond. He was talking again. Thank heaven he talked, so that she didn't have to. Why didn't Hunt go, now that his part in the arrangements was over? Why

didn't he go? She seemed to see his eyes ahead of her as she went.

Hammond's hand was round her arm. It was warm and strong and comfortable. Strange that she should still find it so comfortable. She tried to keep her thoughts around him. That unfailing kindness of his. . . . Yes, she admired him so much for that. A good job he had run into Katrine, or that she had run into him. What did it matter if she *had* done the running? Things had been closing in upon her, and he was there to turn to. Just as, that first evening of his stay at Clayle. . . . No. No more of that parallel. It frightened her. It was like the cutting away of solid ground under her feet.

They went into the spare room, where Katrine stood beside her opened case. She stood, pausing, at ease. How few women could do that, Susan thought suddenly. She herself, for instance . . . she would have gone on fiddling with the case at this fresh entry, or would have dabbed at her belt, or held her hands stiffly by her side. Katrine was perfectly balanced in every line. As graceful as a tree. Those poplar trees, along the road from Sandwich to Clayle . . .

Those poplar trees . . . And the run they had taken together, that evening . . .

"What's it been like to-day?" he had said.

"Pretty awful."

"It always is?"

"Yes, always."

And before he had left,

"If only there were something I could still do. I'll have a hell of a week thinking of you down here."

What a hell of a week it would have been, indeed,

with someone left behind who needed his rescuing and fussing over, and nothing being done about it! How she had plucked at that facile pity of his! It would have been like letting the stray kitten wander on its way . . . or letting Katrine wander on hers.

And when she had come back with him,

"No, it isn't the position I should choose, to have you working under me, or working under Hunt, either —— But you're at the end of your tether, and I'm the one you turn to. Well—marry me——"

The best way he could think of. Devotion. . . . Oh, yes, she had had that. Devotion was a very part of him. He would so enjoy loving a woman, always. But if it hadn't happened to be her . . .

Madness! She was letting her mind ramble like a lunatic's. Just those chance words of Hunt's. . . .

How long had it been rambling? Only a few seconds, after all. Katrine was still standing at her ease. Hammond was walking around the room, eyeing it from various angles.

"I've got a bunch of hangers I can let you have, for the wardrobe," he offered.

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Hammond."

"Johnny's the name. Don't mister me."

"Thank you, Johnny."

He went off and came back with the hangers. He fitted them into the wardrobe.

"Going to be all right now?" he said. "Not going to let things worry you any more?"

"No. You're so kind to me."

How often had she told him that herself, Susan thought. And he had answered . . .

"No one could help being kind to you," Hammond

said. "Come on, Sue. Let's leave her to arrange her things."

Hunt was still in the living-room. He was by the fireplace again. His back was to them as they entered, and it was a moment or so before he turned. His manner seemed fairly normal, when he did. Just that faint tightness about his mouth, that faint gleam that lingered at the back of his eyes.

"Hope that wardrobe'll be roomy enough for her," Hammond observed.

"Oh, I hope so," Hunt said fervently. "I hope so indeed!"

He moved a pace or two here and there, swinging his shoulders at each turn.

"You know, some wives would have cut up pretty rough over this," Hammond went on. "But you, Sue——"

Hunt's shoulders swung again.

"She's being sweet about it all," he broke in. "Are you dropping me a hint to clear out, by the way?"

"What the blazes are you talking about?" Hammond was amazed.

"I just thought if you were working up for another tableau over it, I'd leave you to it."

"What? Oh, that?" Hammond jerked his head towards the passage, flushed slightly, and laughed. "Didn't know you could see. Funny how that kind of thing always annoys a third person. But damn it all, I'm not much of an exhibitionist in that line, am I? No, I'm not working up for anything, believe me. Not in front of you."

Susan sat down and flicked mechanically at the pages of a magazine. Her fingers felt strangely stiff. Hunt took a final swing and stopped still by the fireplace again.

"Bit het-up about this Katrine business, aren't you?" Hammond inquired.

"Not particularly. It's your affair, isn't it?"

"That's what I thought. She needn't interfere with you at all. She won't be looking in on us during the day, even if Sue——"

"Look here," Hunt interrupted suddenly. "I might as well tell you now, after all, and get it over. I want to cut loose from here, Hammond, as soon as we can come to some arrangement."

Susan's head jerked up, and her fingers closed tightly over the edges of the magazine.

"Cut loose?" Hammond repeated, after a pause. "What d'you mean—'cut loose'?"

A muscle moved, above Hunt's jaw. But when he spoke again his voice was quieter.

"I've been dallying with the idea for some little while. I was going to leave it over, and bring it up later. But I think I might as well do it now. It might take some time to put any other arrangements through——"

"One—minute." Hammond was staring at him blankly. "What's the matter with you, for God's sake? If you imagine that Katrine——"

"Oh, to hell with Katrine!" blazed Hunt. He drew a deep breath and became quieter again. "It's nothing to do with Katrine, or any odd incident at all. I just feel I'd like a change."

Hammond swung round upon Susan.

"Can't you say something, Sue? He can't just go, after all this time! Is it because of the ructions with Sue, Hunt? But she wouldn't want you to go, would you, Sue? Not clear out altogether! And I thought you'd got over those, anyway. You've started being friendly——"

Hunt gazed back at him. Susan sat very still, without a word. Stilted expostulations were quite beyond her. Speech of any kind seemed beyond her just then.

"It's nothing to do with any ructions," Hunt said. "I feel I'd like a change."

"But you've always been so keen on it all. You've been mad keen on it all along! It's been like a hobby to you. You've shown more interest in this than in anything else you've ever done!"

Susan kept her eyes away from Hunt's face. Anxious, puzzled words . . . striking across the raw like that!

"Perhaps I did, for a time," Hunt was saying. "But now I feel I'd like a change."

"But why? You can't clear off like this without letting us know why!"

The pause spun itself out for several seconds.

"Why?" Hammond repeated.

Hunt broke suddenly into speech again.

"Haven't I told you? Haven't I said I wanted a change? Have I got to put it in a dozen different ways? I always knew it would mean something like this, if ever I decided to cut free. Give it a rest now, will you, Hammond? Don't drag it all out every other minute, for the rest of the time that I'm here. Yes, I've liked it all right. But I've never liked stick-

ing at a thing long enough to get properly tired of it. I'm going before I do. You could stay on here for ever and be perfectly happy——" His eyes moved for a moment to Susan's, and she raised hers to meet them. "I couldn't," he went on, jerking them back to Hammond again. "I feel I want to get on the move. To do something fresh, in a fresh place——"

Hammond did not answer now. He stood looking down into the fire. After awhile he felt in his pocket for his cigarettes, and lit one. But he kept his gaze on the fire.

Hunt glanced at him again once or twice, and finally broke the silence.

"I could sell out my share just as it stands, of course——"

"Or I could dig around for a spot of extra capital and run the place on my own," Hammond said slowly, still without drawing his eyes away. "Yes, I'll do that. I don't want anyone else."

Hunt moved restlessly again, and waited for Hammond to go on talking. But he had finished, apparently. Hunt looked at his lowered head once more, looked across at Susan because he could no longer keep his eyes from her, and cursed his fate in a sudden wave of bitterness that almost came tearing out in words. And Susan, watching him, grasped the arms of her chair and rose quickly to her feet.

She stood there, helpless, for a moment, under his gaze. Hammond had not turned from the fire. Hunt walked towards the door, to halt half-way.

"In any case, it takes a little time to get these things through, doesn't it?" he said. "Now that I've mentioned it, you can be feeling around."

"All right," Hammond answered, when they had begun to think he would make no anwer at all. "All right, I will."

Hunt moved his eyes to Susan again. But the sound of Katrine's voice from above struck upon them with a sudden sense of shock. Only Hammond seemed unaffected by it. Still he had not turned from the fire.

"Mrs. Hammond, if I could trouble you a minute ——" came the voice.

"Yes, of course——" No, she couldn't have heard that. With an effort, Susan called more loudly. "Yes, of course. I'm just coming."

Hunt pulled the door wide for her, followed her through, and closed it again. They left Hammond still looking into the fire.

"Good night," Hunt said.

"Good night," she replied.

And then,

"Well, I've done it," he went on, under his breath. "Without the waiting. I'm giving it up. You understand what it means, to be—giving it up?"

She nodded faintly. Her hand was resting on the banister-knob, her fingers curved around it. He put his upon it for a second.

"To-morrow?" he muttered. "Soon after four?"

She tried to pull her hand away, but his closed more tightly.

"Yes?" he said. "It's not long now. Yes?"

Don't worry. . . . Don't worry, Sue. Don't worry, Katrine. No one could help being kind to you, Sue . . . Katrine. You're at the end of your tether. Well, marry me. . . . He couldn't say

that to Katrine. It was about the only thing he couldn't.

And it's not long now. Not long . . .

Her hand grew limply still.

"Yes——" she said.

CHAPTER XII

SOON AFTER FOUR——

THE night seemed never-ending to Susan. She lay, staring at the humped-up form in Hammond's bed. After several hours of wide wakefulness she sat up, clasping her knees, and put her cheek down upon them and looked at him again. She wanted to stretch out her hand and touch him. He was the one firm, stable thing in her tossing world. At least, he had been, before she had begun to think. Surely he was still. . . . If only she could stretch out her hand and touch him, he would wake. He would grasp the hand in his and speak to her, and she would grow calm once more. Calm enough to walk into Portman Square just after four to-morrow, and tell Hunt briefly that she had been mad to-night, and that he could go and put his car away again.

To-morrow . . . But the first light of the day was already straggling in. She could see the dim whiteness of Hammond's sheet, the outline of his face. There was a faint gleam upon his eyelids. . . . And then her hands clutched tighter together, with a sudden eerie sense of panic. They were not his lids. They were his eyes. His eyes were open, and he was looking at her. In utter silence, without a movement, looking at her. . . .

Her heart pounded horribly in the stillness. The chill half-light, and that watchfulness from the shadows.

It was quite impossible to speak. And then, as she kept her gaze upon him, her hands loosened. She raised her head, leant closer over him. They were not his eyes after all. His eyes were shut. He was asleep.

She sank down against her pillow and lay for awhile trembling strangely. And finally she drifted into sleep, and the old nightmare descended on her again. She was back in the " John Hammond." But there was no hope of an escape this time, because the stray kitten had turned out to be not a kitten at all, but another young woman in distress. And Johnny had already married her.

He was moving about the room when she awoke. His hair was rough and he looked like a sleepy schoolboy. How dreadfully fantastic it had been . . . that moment in the dawn ! She stirred, and he looked across at her.

" Hullo," he said. " Decided to wake up ? " He went over to the window and hitched at a curtain. " Have a good night ? "

" Yes, thanks." Why did he have to ask that when she hadn't, when she had to lie about it ? No, she needn't lie. " At least, not very," she added. " What with everything happening at once, last night— There was a lot to think about——"

He was brushing his hair by the glass now, his back to her.

" I'm sorry about that," he said. " Yes, it was a pretty full evening on the whole, wasn't it ? "

" Yes."

The same early-morning procedure, the same as it had always been. Johnny in his blue dressing-gown,

plying his brushes in exactly the same way as usual. In another second he would be down for the tea. And yet everything had changed. Odd silences seemed to shriek with suspicion. Chance friendly words seemed to twist themselves into a new significance.

Hammond put the brushes down and smiled across at her. He was just the same. Of course he was just the same. It was only in her own mind that the change had come. Nothing had altered for him since that first week here together, that week of heady gaiety and easy laughter. It would never have altered for her, if they had been left alone, if that day had never come when she had looked down from the window, and Hunt had stood staring up.

"Well, off for the tea," Hammond observed, and strode away to run down the stairs.

She heard him at Katrine's door a few minutes later.

"Katrine!" he called. The name was a pleasant thing, upon his lips.

"Oh—Johnny?" Katrine sounded lazier than ever. One could picture her trailing black hair and trailing white arms. "Come in."

He laughed. There was the tinkle of a cup.

"Here's your tea, just outside the door, if you can bestir yourself to walk that far for it. Been sleeping your head off?"

That soothing, satisfying quality in his voice. It had always seemed to say so many things. There was a lightness in it that was a deepness too. A faint lilt that was like a caress. So delightful it had been, to be greeted by that voice upon waking, Susan had thought, and to know that it was the one he used only for her. But it wasn't. No, it was just the one

he used for distressed young women who had placed themselves in his care. He was speaking the same to Katrine.

He came back to the room finally, poured out her cup and brought it across to her. The smile had faded from his face and he seemed preoccupied for the moment.

"It's going to be funny without Hunt," he remarked.

He hadn't spoken of it to her before, and she had wondered why. She had to make an effort for complete steadiness, as she reached out for the cup.

"I'll miss him," he said. He strolled away, but turned again.

"What about you? Will you miss him?"

Why did he have to come out with that, so suddenly and unexpectedly? Her cup clattered a little, and some of the tea spilled into the saucer.

"Here, hold it still!" He came across and took it from her. He took it rather briskly. It was the only approach to impatience he had ever shown with her.

He emptied the saucer and refilled the cup. As he held it out again, his own hand was slightly unsteady.

"You've got me doing it now!" he muttered. "What were we talking about, anyway? Oh, yes—Hunt."

Susan sat on the edge of her bed and stared into the cup.

"You were saying you'd miss him," she said after a moment. "Yes, I will too. But of course I haven't known him as long as you have——"

The pulse beat in her throat again. He was still standing quite near her. She could see the end of his dressing-gown, his pyjamaed legs. Silences that seemed

to shriek with suspicion . . . And his words, each one breathing a ghastly significance. Quite ordinary words. Nothing behind them, really. If he thought anything were wrong, he would ask her. That had always been his way. "What's the matter, Sue? Everything's all right, isn't it?"

What a relief it would have been to crumple up on the floor just by his feet, there . . . to put clinging arms around his knees . . . to say, "Johnny, something awful has happened, but you'll help me, won't you? Everything will be all right if you'll help me."

"Aren't you going to drink it?" he asked.

She sipped at the tea, under his eyes. She finished it somehow and he took the cup from her. Then he put it down abruptly on the floor and sat down beside her and pulled her close to him. He pressed her head against his shoulder, and his cheek against her hair.

"I'm sorry you didn't sleep well," he murmured vaguely. His arm tightened still more, and he drew up her hand and passed it across his lips. "I'm sorry——" he said again, after a pause. And then he released her almost as suddenly, and walked over to pick up his brushes again.

As she went downstairs, she heard his voice talking to Katrine, and she heard him laughing. Katrine laughed too. A low chuckle of a laugh, she had. She swayed into the kitchen and appraised the hunted Ellis. "A serving-man? Oh, how nice." She swayed through the shop, with Hammond following her with airy comments and explanations, and laughter again at her odd mistakes. She put most of her quaint ignorances on, Susan decided. I'm not jealous, she told

herself. I'd have no right, anyway, but I've got no need, either. He's as open as daylight over it. She's just something else that he's brought back. But it's all so exactly the same. . . .

She sat and thought about her over the breakfast-table. Suppose Johnny had married her, would he have treated her in the same way? Not quite so much like a child, perhaps. He would never have called her a funny little devil, for instance, or a fat-head, little or otherwise. And Katrine wouldn't have allowed her hair to be ruffled up. He would have smoothed it down instead, no doubt. But apart from that . . . yes, just the same.

"You looked so nice when you had that beard," Katrine said.

And he would still have had the beard. And would Katrine have ruled him with a mere lift of her fingers? Would she not!

"I like him better without it," Susan observed.

"Oh, but it was so very short, so close and clipped. And with that square chin of his—so masculine——"

Susan did not argue any further. She seemed to have spent years on end arguing over Johnny, and beginning again with someone else was beyond her. What a battleground he had been! Poor square-chinned Johnny!

"About the job——" Katrine said, awhile later. "You did tell me you might be able——"

"Oh, yes, I'll punt around for you. I don't know that I'll find anything for a bit, but I'll try. You want to be sure of what you take on." Hammond stirred his coffee, gazing down at it. "I don't like the idea of it, you know—girls like you living on your

own. It's a pity. Women shouldn't have to support themselves at all, anyway."

It struck Susan that possibly Katrine wouldn't be keen on it, either, if she could find a way out of it.

She realized suddenly that she was leaving her food almost untouched. She made an attack with her knife and fork, but still she didn't eat it.

"There's always your shop, while I'm waiting," Katrine said. "I love your shop."

The past, echoing again.

Hammond shook his head faintly. But he smiled at her, and she smiled slowly back.

Susan went on plying her knife and fork, still without attempting to eat. Her thoughts seemed to cry aloud in her head. She's not going to dig herself into that, Johnny . . . when he's gone. She can't do that! There's not room for two of us here, and I *am* the one you married!

A door clicked smartly to. Footsteps strolled along the passage after a moment, and in at the shop. Susan's heart leapt up dizzily. She tried to busy herself with her cup.

Hammond looked at his watch.

"Good lord, I've been spinning my time out all right to-day!" he said. "That's Hunt!"

Susan went out soon after lunch. She was half afraid that Katrine would offer to go with her, but fortunately she didn't. She left her trying to "lose herself a moment" on her bed. She had to guard her looks, she said. They were her main asset.

If she's not pretty careful, Susan mused, as she closed the front door and walked away, she'll be as

heavy as a porpoise by the time she's forty. And I rather hope she is.

She tried to keep her mind off the programme ahead of her. She knew just what it would be, of course. She was going to make a tour of the shops, and try to find the new coat she was looking for. And then she would stop at Portman Square on her way back and explain quite briefly that the drive was impossible. But meanwhile she wanted to keep her mind off it.

Thinking of Katrine didn't help much, though. The thought of Katrine was beginning to make her feel strangely lonely and forlorn. The thought that "Hunt and Hammond" no longer housed two men and one woman, but two women and one man. . . .

She walked endlessly. She stopped now and then to look in shop windows, but she had forgotten the coat altogether. The pavements were crowded and she was jostled now and then. She threaded her way through, walked on and on, turned vaguely after an hour of it and began to walk back.

It was just on a quarter-past four when she reached Portman Square. Hunt was strolling up and down by his car, his hands in his pockets, his shoulders moving rather jerkily. He stopped as he saw her. He watched her as she walked up to him.

"I'd begun to think you weren't coming," he told her. "And I'd have gone back and fetched you, or waited for you."

"Philip, we were quite mad to arrange this."

He opened the door of the car.

"Say what you like on the way down. Don't waste time now."

"I've decided I'm not going."

"I daresay. I could have had a pretty good guess that you'd come up with something like that on your mind. I'm beginning to know you very well, Susan. And perhaps you're beginning to know me? Perhaps you'll realize that after waiting all night and all day until four o'clock, and then standing here ten minutes that seemed like ten hours, I'm not going to hand you a meek 'Just as you say' and go off again. You gave me, last night, something that amounted to a promise. So get in here and don't be—childish."

Her cheeks flamed.

"Don't use that word to me! I loathe it!"

"That's why I used it. I don't want to have to bundle you in by force."

"I know I—sort of promised. But I'm asking you——"

"And I'm afraid I'm telling you."

His hand touched her arm, and his voice changed a little.

"You're looking tired," he said. "The run's going to revive you. Get in, Susan."

The hand guided her through the door, and she found herself sinking back in the seat. The engine hummed into life and they were off. She might have known, she thought, as she leant her head back. She had put up her little travesty of a fight, but she might have known . . .

Hunt did not speak for awhile, though he looked at her from time to time.

"Feeling more rested?" he said at length.

"Yes, thank you. Walking among crowds—it takes it out of you."

"Your mouth droops at the corners when you're

tired, and your eyes seem to grow longer. I used to notice that sometimes when we all sat in that back room in the evenings. I used to feel an idle kind of wish to scoop you up out of your chair and carry you upstairs."

She turned her eyes upon him. She saw the faint play of a muscle at the side of his face.

"Yes, that was even before all this happened," he went on. "It was when I wanted to wring your neck half a dozen times a day. But I often felt it would be pleasant to pick you up—in the evenings, when you were tired."

She drew her eyes away again. She made no answer at all, and he seemed to want none. Silences had begun to matter, with Johnny. They didn't matter now.

"Hammond hasn't mentioned it again—about my going," Hunt said. "He's keeping very quiet. In fact he's getting on my nerves pretty badly. Funny he should be upset about it——"

He drove on, through another long silence. They were nearing the outskirts of London now, and the traffic had thinned.

"I want to get it over," he said. "I want to see you while I can, but I want to get the whole thing over. It's becoming—more of a strain than I thought."

"And then?" she asked him after awhile. "What will you do then?"

"God knows. I'll still have my bit of capital. I can think it over, when I feel like it. I might get hold of another partnership of some sort. But first of all I'll probably go over to Paris for a few weeks. I liked it there. And it's different——"

On through green fields, with the wind more boisterous through the windows.

"And there," he said, "I'll have to try to forget I ever met you."

East Grinstead, and the side lane to Miller's Heath. The Plough Inn. It looked strangely altered. That was because of the two great elms beside it. They had been full and green and lush before. They were almost bare now.

The landlord met them in the passage with loud-voiced welcome, and set the table himself with much bustling servility and dropping of knives. Hunt's face awed and scared him.

"I was hoping you hadn't forgotten us, sir," he said as he set down the teapot. "I was hoping I might have the pleasure of seeing you and your wife again."

And he caught his elbow in a cup, righted it wild-eyed, and sidled out of the door.

Hunt did not speak, and this time she almost prayed that he would. He looked at her awhile, until she was on the point of crying out to him to stop. Then he moved his eyes away, and walked to the window. And finally he turned.

She poured out from the large brown teapot. Before . . . she had been waiting for Johnny, and he hadn't come. And instead . . . What a dreadful thing it had been, that had come to face her that afternoon.

"I'll go over there," Hunt said, "with the idea of trying to forget I ever met you. Sounds all right, doesn't it? Actually I'll be thinking of you every minute. Everything I see, I'll want to show to you.

I'll be wishing you were there. I'll be thinking that perhaps—you might have been."

She stood with her back to the table now, staring at him.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't look so alarmed. And for the Lord's sake don't look so shocked. What do you think I mean? What do you think I'm made of? If it weren't for a few conventions—if we had a bit more resolution—if it weren't for Hammond being the kind of genial idiot I couldn't bring myself really to hurt—if it weren't for you being so ridiculously young and ridiculously untouched—if—if—yes, you know what I mean."

She still stared at him, as he walked nearer to her.

"Well?" he said. "You're afraid of hearing it put into words, aren't you? It's all got to be in the air, and it mustn't be spoken of? Drop your niceties just for a moment, and think of what's actually at the back of this. If it weren't for that string of obstacles I've just run through, I'd be taking you with me."

She did not move or speak. Her hands were closed tightly over the edge of the table.

"And then I'd see that you were set free," he went on. "And then I'd marry you. People would be able to say things like that——" He flourished a vague hand towards the door and the departed landlord, "and I could answer them. 'You and your wife——'"

She saw a faint hint of his smile again, and suddenly she put her hands up to her eyes, and pressed them there.

"Don't say that!" she muttered. "Don't say it! Don't say it!"

He drew her hands down.

"Yes, you're afraid of words, Susan," he said. He grasped the hands tightly, jerked her suddenly close. She struggled, and he held her arms against her side as he brought his mouth hard against hers. Then he let her go, and he went back to the window, and she groped for the edge of the table again, behind her. Her head felt strangely cold.

"Why did you try to stop me?" he asked her. "What's wrong now? Even if I have come out with a little plain speaking, we still know how the thing stands, don't we?"

"I thought we did," she said breathlessly. "I hadn't got as far as—dwelling on that at all. It's frightening me more than anything has ever done before, and you just make it worse! It's like some awful thing that begins to grow before you know it's there, and then before you can stop it it expands under your very eyes in leaps and bounds, and instead of your thinking it's safe, it's towering over you— I don't know how I'm putting it or what I'm saying, quite. It's all too much of a nightmare!"

He did not turn. He kept his face away from her.

"A nightmare," he repeated. "A noisome kind of growth. A man and a woman falling in love."

He gazed out across the wide stretch of fields.

"Why did we come here, anyway?" he said, after a long pause. "Look at it. Miles of desolation. It was fine and clear when I called for you before."

He was silent again. Susan stood with her eyes upon the back of the sleek, dark head.

"I wanted to run down for you that day," he went on, more absently. "The idea appealed to me quite a lot, though I didn't know why, at the time. That was

probably what stopped me from getting in touch with Hammond, and letting him do it."

"You could have let him come, then? You did think of it?"

Let him. . . . The words passed them both by. They took them for granted.

"Oh, yes. And he'd have hurried like hell and almost licked your feet if he was five minutes over time. That was another reason, I suppose, why I wanted to do it myself."

"So that you could keep me waiting?"

"For a bit, yes. Bossing Hammond had gone to your head. I daresay it'll go to your head more and more as you go on. He'll be nothing but a walking 'Yes, dear.' You'll like that, will you?"

She walked suddenly near to him.

"What do you mean? What are you saying now?"

"It's what I'm going to say. Plain speaking again. If you were my wife, Susan, any knuckling under that was done—wouldn't be done by me. And I fancy you'd like that still more. You're not cut out for the rôle of the dominant woman."

"I don't want your plain speaking!" she flamed at him, maddened suddenly by the flicker of his smile. "At least—now you *have* said that—no, I should hate it! I've been dictated to all my life. I could never have started fighting it out all over again with you!"

"You wouldn't fight it out," he told her. "With me, you'd like it. You'd start revelling in it. You'd thank heaven you hadn't got to go through the rest of your life with a 'yes' man."

As he turned his eyes upon her, the answer that had rushed to her lips faltered and died. She moved

sharply backwards as he put out his hands towards her. But they closed on her shoulders and pulled her near.

"Just tell me why you married Hammond," he said. "Were you—in love with him?"

She tried to loosen his hands with hers.

"Will you let me go? Will you take me away again—take me back? Let me——"

"You found him a pleasant way out, didn't you? And what did he find you? Something helpless and attractive that he could thoroughly enjoy making a fool of himself over. And you're both going to base the rest of your lives on that!"

She was still again. She stared up into his face.

"No, on more than that. He told me right at the beginning how much he cared——"

"Of course he did. And of course he brought you back and married you and settled down to adore you. But he could pretty soon do the same again. He'd soon have someone else running him. Take that Katrine, for instance——"

The sudden blaze in her eyes cut his words short. She pulled fiercely free from him.

"It was only a few minutes ago you were saying we still knew how the thing stood!" She kept her wide gaze fixed upon him, and he gazed back, almost dazzled. "You covered yourself most carefully with that! And now already you're speaking of—what he'd do if I weren't there. And in another minute I suppose you'll take yet a further step——"

"Yes, I'm just coming to it." The blaze was kindling in his eyes too. "If we let him into the whole thing—told him exactly why I'm giving everything

up—put it all to him—let him do what he could about it——"

"You're mad!" she breathed, her face very white. Her voice rose a little. "You're mad!"

"Listen, will you? I can't go off and leave you! He doesn't feel as I do. He'll pad round you and humour you to death, but he'd never feel as I do! If we told him, and left it to him to do what he liked, you know what it would be. He'd get the shock over and set to work to find the best way out of it."

"I'd never let him! I tell you I'd never let him! That it should grow to this——"

"And it wouldn't hurt him as much as you think it would. Not when he'd really begun to absorb it. I can see him almost enjoying it before he'd finished. Making his Great Renunciation. Saying the biggest 'All right' he'd ever said in his life. Standing aside with a flourish——"

"Opening the door——" Susan said wildly, "to let us pass through——"

"Susan——"

"No, I don't mean it that way! You don't understand! We're not going to do that to him!"

"Hasn't he always stood aside and liked it? Hasn't he always fallen over himself to be obliging? Well, damn it, he's going to be obliging in this!"

They stood looking at each other. His face was almost as pale as hers now.

"No——" Her voice was shot through by a sharp tremor. "He's not going to be given the chance! No, don't speak of it any more! Why did we speak of it at all?"

She put her hands up to her eyes again. There were sudden tears in them.

"Why did we speak of it——"

He reached out and drew her close again, his hand around her head. And there was silence.

"Let's go," he said at last.

It was raining as they went out to the car. They set off without a word. They joined the London road and kept on, still in silence.

Hunt drove fast, as usual, his eyes in a fixed stare ahead of him. Once he had to brake unexpectedly, and they skidded a little. Susan held the edge of her seat, to avoid clutching at his arm. He gave a vague mutter as he righted their course, and slackened speed for awhile afterwards. Then, on a straight stretch, he began to increase again.

She spoke, finally.

"We must never let him know——"

He kept his eyes ahead. They still looked fixed, almost expressionless.

"No. We slink back and cover our tracks, don't we?" he said. Even his voice seemed to run on a monotone. "I leave you a few hundred yards from home, so that you can go back from your shop-gazing, and I've been at a book show since a quarter-past four."

She sat with her hands in her lap. Then all at once she spoke again.

"My bag! I've left it behind! If you could turn — This side lane——"

He was badly startled by the suddenness of it. His foot pressed involuntarily on the brake again.

Pressed sharply. They were into another skid. There came a hoot and a shout from a car approaching them, and the screech of more brakes. They swerved aside and swerved back again. And Susan shut her eyes tightly as the impact came.

CHAPTER XIII

HAMMOND CROSS-EXAMINES

SHE opened them again, more slowly. Her head was down against the dashboard. Now it was lifted up. She heard Hunt's voice.

"Susan—my dearest——"

"I'm all right, aren't I?" she murmured, pulling off her hat and feeling dazedly for the source of the trickle of blood that ran down her face.

He looked at the cut above her temple, pressed his handkerchief to it.

"It isn't deep. Yes, it's all right." His voice jumped a little. "But we'll have to get it patched up." Footsteps came along the road towards them. "Hold this against it," he said. "I'll be back in a second."

He shook blood from his own wrist as he stepped out. She heard his voice again vaguely.

"Yes, I'm not arguing it. Glad you're not hurt. . . . Yes, I was all that. . . . Yes, I've no doubt I ought to be. . . . Here's my card and you can get on with it. I want to find a doctor."

He was back shortly afterwards. He dabbed at Susan's forehead again, holding her head against his shoulder.

"Our front wing and his, and the bumpers," he said. "We'll be able to go on, anyway."

"You've hurt your wrist!"

" Just a knock. I saw you pitching forward, and tried to get there first."

He smoothed back her hair.

" I'm sorry about this, if apologizing's any good."

" I suppose it was my fault, asking you to turn so quickly."

" I shouldn't have taken any notice." He set her back and they moved off again. " No, I was just a ruddy fool."

" There's still my bag——" she said after awhile.

" Damn your bag ! "

They found a doctor a few miles on. The forehead and the wrist were plastered.

" I should go to bed," Susan was told. " Get a good sleep."

" My bag——" she said to Hunt, as they went on.

" Oh, to—— I'll fetch it later, Susan. We're not going back now. I'm taking you straight on. Just get that well into your head, will you ? "

She leaned back in her seat, and he looked at her every now and then. He was driving more slowly. His hands on the wheel were not quite steady.

" And I don't leave you a few hundred yards off, after all," he went on. " And I haven't been spending all my time at the book show. Even Hammond will get that."

She turned her head quickly.

" Keep still," he said. " We happened to meet. I left the show early on, and ran against you. We both felt like a short spin out——"

Ellis had stayed on a little later, and was in the passage when Hunt pushed open the door. He blinked

at them a moment, stood aside to let them pass, followed them with his eyes.

"Mrs. Hammond's had a slight accident," Hunt said.

"Yes, Mr. Hunt. . . . If there's anything I can do for either of you——"

"Nothing, thanks. Isn't anyone else in?"

"No, not at the minute, Mr. Hunt." Ellis's voice was almost eagerly reassuring. Hunt stared at him, and he fiddled with the bowler hat he was holding. "Mr. Hammond left just a short while ago," he went on. "He took Miss—er—Katrine along to see Mr. Blair, I believe. I don't imagine he'll be very long."

Hunt nodded. He turned to Susan.

"You go upstairs," he murmured. "I'll tell Hammond."

She went. She was glad to be free of the embarrassing presence of Ellis. Not that Ellis really suspected, of course. . . .

Hunt turned his head again, and resumed his survey.

"If you'd like me to tell Mr. Hammond anything instead, Mr. Hunt," Ellis suggested, "I'll stay on with pleasure."

Hunt stuck a cigarette in his mouth, still staring at him. He drew his eyes away as he lit it.

"If you'd care to go straight on, I mean, Mr. Hunt," Ellis said. "Any message—or perhaps you'd prefer me not to mention your name——" He was very red now. He twirled the bowler hat rather frenziedly. "I mean, Mr. Hunt, anything I could do for you——"

"No, thanks," said Hunt, after a pause. "I'll be waiting here myself."

"Then you'd rather I went?"

"Yes, you can clear off."

And he stood just where he was, absently smoking, for some time after Ellis had gone.

Hammond came in alone, full of questions. He had been studying the damage to Hunt's car, outside. He commiserated over the wrist, very conspicuous in a crossed strapping. And at first mention of Susan the colour was swept from his face, and his breath caught in his throat.

"She's all right," Hunt told him, trying to hide a wave of impatience. An exhibition of distress from Hammond was the last thing he wanted to cope with, this evening. "Quite a slight kind of cut, on her head. It's been patched up, anyway."

Hammond's mouth moved for a second before the next word came.

"Stitches?"

"Lord, no! Not much more than a scratch. It'll be healed in a day or so. She's upstairs, taking it a bit easy."

Hammond swung round.

"I happened to leave that show——" Hunt went on.

Hammond wasn't listening. He was already tearing up the stairs. Susan heard him coming, as she sat on the side of her bed. She kept very still.

"Sue——" He took her face in his hands, tilted it back. "What—where——"

"It's nothing, really, Johnny. I don't know why I came up here at all."

Only to get away from Hunt. Only to avoid having to stand side by side with him, as it were, and explain the thing away like a guilty couple in a melodrama.

"Lie down," Hammond said. "You're not feeling dazed, or anything?"

"No."

Dazed? She had been feeling half dazed for weeks. His hand had closed over hers now. His soothing touch had always quietened her. But now it wasn't soothing. His fingers moved restlessly. And she was waiting . . . waiting. . . .

She leant back against her pillow because he wanted her to. He sat down on the bed. He kept his eyes on her face for awhile, and she moved her head. She ought to be speaking. A casual reference to a casual meeting. . . .

His gaze strayed around the room, and came back to her.

"Your head doesn't ache, or anything?"

"No, thank you. At least—yes, it does, a little." That would avoid talking much, anyway.

He put his other hand on it. She could feel a pulse beating there. Was it a pulse in her head, or a pulse in his hand?

"How did it all come about?" he said.

"It was a skid. I don't quite know——"

"I don't mean that. I mean—all of it. Hunt taking you——"

If it was a pulse in her head, he must feel that beating of it.

"We ran against each other, later. We both felt like a short spin."

He took his hand away after awhile.

"Wish I'd been able to take you instead," he said.

"Yes. But you know how these things happen. You decide all at once——"

"Hunt's apt to be a fool, on the road. How he could have skidded——"

"It was the wet. You know how it is in the wet——"

They were silent again. And through the silence a faint, steady sound began to pluck madly upon her strained nerves. The tapping of Hammond's shoe against the low table by the side of the bed. As regular as the ticking of a clock.

She would have called out to him to stop in another second, if he hadn't spoken just then.

"Go far?" he said. "Out long?"

"Not very long. Not far—just around a bit—just out——" Better not to tell him they had stopped. Or better to tell him? She couldn't think. But if Hunt had gone to that show at all, they wouldn't have had long to spare.

"Just out of London," she said.

He nodded. "Yes, it hasn't been raining here."

It hadn't been raining most of the way, now she thought of it. Just the few miles out of East Grinstead.

"Much on the road when it—happened?" he said.

"No, just us, and another car, coming the other way."

"Pretty quiet, then?"

"Yes. Just then——"

"Hunt didn't mention exactly where it was."

"I don't know exactly, myself. The Eastbourne road somewhere, I suppose. Just the beginning of it, sort of thing——"

If he didn't stop tapping his foot, she felt that she would scream.

" And you're sure you're not feeling a bit shaken ? " he asked her.

" No—yes, Johnny, a bit. I don't want to keep on talking about it all——"

His hand touched hers, closed over it a second.

" No, of course not. I'm sorry——" He stood up. He wandered around the room for awhile. He went to the window and gazed at the car. And finally, with a murmured word, he went out again, and walked downstairs.

He walked rather slowly. Half-way down he slackened still more, and gave a slight hitch to his flannel collar. It felt tight. It felt as if it were trying to choke him.

Hunt was standing in the middle of the living-room. He looked up the moment Hammond entered. Hammond's eyes strayed away, towards the window, and he made a business of pulling the curtains. He jerked and fumbled for so long that Hunt's fingers began to curl impatiently at his sides.

" Well, now you've seen her, everything's all right, isn't it ? " he said.

" Yes—oh, yes, everything's all right——" Hammond turned round more briskly, as though with a sudden effort. " Didn't go along to the show after all, eh ? I suppose that touch of sun——"

" Of course I went." Hunt drove a hand into his pocket. " But I left again fairly soon after."

Hammond's wandering glance halted. He stared fixedly at a chair.

" Any objection to my leaving again ? " Hunt asked him.

Hammond raised his eyes.

"Oh, no—if you felt like some air. There was some of Blair's work there. His wood-cut stuff——"

"Was there? I didn't get all round."

"He looked in himself this afternoon for an hour, he told me. About half-past three."

Hammond's eyes shifted to the chair again. He put up a hand to the knot of his tie, eased it slightly. Hunt made no movement at all.

"He didn't see you," Hammond added.

For a second, Hunt's brain faltered in its search for an answer. For a second he felt his poise slipping. And then he had gripped at it again. His confidence was back in full flood, ready for anything. For the hand on Hammond's tie was shaking visibly.

"Didn't he? Nothing very staggering about that, is there? I didn't see him, either. Didn't notice anyone particularly. I came away because I didn't feel like mixing around with the usual crowd——"

"There weren't many there to-day, apparently."

Hunt looked at him quite steadily.

"Too many for me. What do you mean, exactly, by all this, Hammond? Anything at the back of it? Are you suggesting for some reason or other that I'd just make that an excuse to mike off for the afternoon, or something? If I said I was going along there, I suppose you can take it that I went?"

Hammond's hand jerked down again after a moment.

"Of course," he muttered.

He walked over to the corner.

"Have a drink, by the way?" he said.

Hunt could certainly have done with one. But a sudden instinct prompted him to refuse. He couldn't do it, somehow.

"No, thanks."

"No?" Hammond turned, surprised.

"No, thanks. Not just now."

Hammond splashed one out for himself, rather noisily. Everything seemed to clatter at once. He drank it off, and Hunt watched him. Yes, it was damned strange, not being able to take a drink from Hammond. Almost the strangest part of it all.

Hammond began to walk again. Over to the window. Over to the fireplace. He looked into the fire blankly for awhile, then he gave a sharp blink and moved again. The strain of the silence began to tell upon Hunt.

"So you took Katrine along to see Blair?" he said.

"Yes, he might be able to offer her something. I left her there."

They talked of Katrine for a time. Hammond entered into it with a dash of energy, keeping his end well up. Then all at once the subject flagged, and silence came again.

"Pity you ran into rain," Hammond remarked.

"What? Oh, yes. It was the wet surface that started it all."

He'd been talking to Susan of course. He must remember that. What had she told him? Why in hell hadn't they settled it all in detail?

"Pity you had to smash into something on a road as quiet as that seemed to be," Hammond went on. "The Eastbourne road, wasn't it?"

"The Eastbourne road, as it happened. And if you think that smash was any joke to me——"

Hunt paused. There was a sudden dart of life across

Hammond's eyes. A dart of fear. A flash of sheer panic. He met Hunt's inquiring gaze for a moment, then swung over to the other side of the room, with his back to him. And after awhile he turned again.

"Touch East Grinstead at all?" he asked.

What was he at now? Checking up on Susan? What *had* he got into that head of his?

"I believe so. I didn't follow the route with a map. But I seem to remember East Grinstead. Why?"

"Not just out of London, then? As far as East Grinstead? Sue——" His mouth twitched at the name. "Sue said just out of London."

Hunt tried to puzzle it out, but his face did not move a muscle.

"It wouldn't seem much farther, at the pace we were going. Only about three-quarters of an hour all the way. How do you get hold of East Grinstead, then? What's the matter with you? Have us sleuthed, or something? Hammond, will you *keep still*?"

Hammond was moving to the fireplace again. He put a hand on the mantelpiece.

"And from there—did you happen to look in for tea at a place called——" He groped helplessly for a moment, his forehead puckered, "something Heath?" Another pause. "Miller's Heath?"

Hunt's eyebrows jerked a little now. Then they drew down over his narrowed eyes.

"Perhaps you'll tell me what you're getting at?"

"Did you, Hunt?"

"Yes, we did. The Plough Inn at Miller's Heath. The prospect of a spot of tea appealed to us. It's usual to feel that way, around——" He almost made

his first slip, " around half-past five," he said, " if you haven't had one before."

" You didn't drink any, though. You just left it. You didn't really want any tea."

" For God's sake——" Hunt was frankly startled. He drew a sharp breath. " Have you gone off your head, Hammond ? "

" Not—quite." Hammond took the hand away and ran it through his hair. " You've been there before ? "

" How in heaven's name you can talk about that tea, and what we——"

" Have you been there before ? "

" Yes. I went to fetch her from there, when she ran out on the bus and phoned up. Perhaps you remember the incident ? "

Hammond's hair was grotesquely ruffled by now.

" No other time ? "

" No. What other time could there be ? "

" No other time at all ? "

" *No !* "

" When she went down to Clayle for those few days, for instance. When she said she went down to Clayle——"

" Good God ! You can't be tight on just one drink ! "

" I'm not—unfortunately. You haven't been there with her—any other time ? " Hammond's voice jumped unevenly. It was slightly thick.

Hunt walked slowly forward until he stood within a yard of him. Going away and leaving it all, he thought. Cutting loose and leaving everything just as he found it. Trying to carry that through without blowing the whole thing up. And now Hammond's suspicions even running madly beyond the limits of

fact. Hunt was aware of a furious and righteous indignation.

"Except for the one occasion when she phoned up for you to fetch her, and I went instead, as you weren't here," he said. "I haven't been there with her at all, or anywhere else. And you know the best treatment for incipient hysteria, don't you? It's a good clout round the face."

Hammond blinked sharply, almost as though that clout had been forthcoming. His eyes were very bright. His face was very pale.

"Then will you tell me," he said, "why she's known at that inn as——" His voice trailed off. Laboriously, he began again. "Will you tell me why she's known at that inn as your wife?"

"How in—who——" hunt brought out after a moment, in amazement. "Hadn't you better start telling *me* just what you're basing all this on?"

"Yes, I'll tell you. Just before I went out, this evening, I had a phone call. It seems that a bag was left behind."

That bag again. . . .

"It was the landlord who spoke to me," Hammond went on. His words ran quickly over each other. "He'd looked inside for an address, and he'd come across a bit of one of our letter-headings. He couldn't find any name on it, apart from that, only—some scrawl of a shopping list on the back. He just wondered offhand, he said, if it was either of us who'd called in with our wife for tea to-day. I told him it wasn't, but I hung on for awhile, trying to be helpful. Can you see me there, trying to be helpful? I thought if it was someone I knew, I might tumble on who it

was. A brown leather bag, he said. How many women go around carrying brown leather bags? A young couple, married. They'd told him so, and they'd been there before. And as I entered into it, sort of thing, he warmed up a bit more. He started chortling over it. God, how he chortled over it! They probably wouldn't know from Adam where it was, because they were both well up in the air over something or other, and they'd even ordered tea and left it all standing in the cups. And I laughed too, and tried to think who they were, and gave it up. I couldn't think! Rather funny, that—wasn't it?"

Nothing but that. It had all arisen out of nothing but that. Hunt could have given a yell of laughter himself. He paused a moment before he answered. So this is what you'd be like while you were getting the shock over, he thought. Jerking about like a jointed doll. Stammering over your words. Look at your hands! You're afraid. You're a coward, Hammond. You couldn't even keep your eyes squarely on me while you were getting it out. If I told you the truth, what would you do then? Crumple up? Burst into tears? And I've got to clear out of it all and leave you just as you were. I've got to give you best.

"Pull yourself together, will you?" he said. "I suppose the mistake over the wife business was made that time I fetched her, and she was expecting you. She must have made some mention that you were coming, I suppose. Anyway, we just didn't bother to correct it, that's all. You don't go around saying, 'No, this isn't my wife. This is the wife of my partner.' Why should you? What's it matter to them? And when we went again to-day, we still didn't bother.

And if we did leave our blasted tea, aren't you entitled to do that if it doesn't quite please your palate? Mine's pretty sensitive, for one. And if we were—'up in the air,' was it?—you'd be the same if you were treated as somebody's husband by an innkeeper as fatly coy-looking as that one. And because of his babblings over the phone, because we two fraternize a bit on a short spin out of town—and damn it, you've always wanted us to break the ice up!—just because of that, you decide to make this flaming exhibition of yourself!"

Hammond had begun to sag a little at the shoulders. He sank down into a chair and ran his fingers into his hair again.

"I'm sorry——" he muttered. "Yes—I see—I'm sorry——"

Hunt looked down at the bent head. His mouth twisted slightly.

"I didn't mean to go off like that, Hunt. It all seemed to come so quickly— Too quickly to think— Sort of lost myself——"

There was a brief pause. Hammond took a couple of deep breaths.

"I was on edge to start with, thinking of her in that smash——"

"And don't you think I'm on edge too, for the same reason?"

Hammond's head jerked up.

"You?"

"Of course." Hunt still stared down at him. "Didn't I see it happen?"

"Yes, of course. I'm sorry——"

Hammond drew his eyes away.

"If you could put it all out of your head——" he went on after awhile. "I don't know quite what I've been saying, but I realize it must have been something pretty awful. If you could manage to forget it all, just think of it as—yes, hysteria, wasn't it? I'll apologize fifty times over, if you want me to, but you wouldn't let Sue know about this, would you? I couldn't have her know what I've been thinking—these last few minutes!"

"Good job you've pulled round before you see her again," Hunt told him. Why have I taken all this trouble to gloss the thing over? Why didn't I let him have it straight out?

There was silence again. Hammond smoothed down his hair, took one of Hunt's proffered cigarettes, and lit up. He looked into the fire, making no further effort to speak, and Hunt glanced at his watch, and wondered why he was lingering.

Suddenly they heard Susan's footsteps on the stairs. They both stiffened slightly, but they avoided each other's eyes.

She came down rather slowly. She was anxious and afraid. Afraid to let them talk alone any longer. She pushed open the door, and her gaze went from one to the other. Hunt's face was as impassive as usual. Hammond's struggled into a smile as he stood up. He could have gone down and kissed her feet and rubbed his face on the ground before her, in the depths of his abasement. Instead he settled her in a chair and propped a cushion behind her, and touched her head with diffident fingers, and asked her how she felt, over and over, in varying forms. Hunt eyed him throughout, and Susan longed to be able to ask him

to stop. She was wondering how much Hunt had told him. And he was thinking, "Can I drop her any kind of a hint, without his cottoning on to what I'm doing?"

But Hammond avoided the subject completely, and he was forced to give up any attempt. Hammond's voice wasn't quite level even yet. He wondered if Susan noticed it too. And after five raging minutes of watching those fawning attentions to her, he suddenly bade them good-bye and left.

Hammond sat down on the arm of her chair, touching her now and then. When he stopped talking, the silences were almost unendurable, but she could not find words to break them. She had to leave it to him.

And into one of the silences came suddenly the blare of the telephone bell. There was no reason, surely, why her heart should leap so horribly at it, and why Hammond's hand should clench on the edge of the arm.

He rose to his feet, steady again, and smiled down at her as he went off to answer it. He came back after a moment. It was Laura, wanting to speak to her. Only Laura.

Why should he watch her, then, as she went out? Why should he do that, if it was only Laura?

She took up the telephone.

"Hullo?" Laura said. "It *is* you now, is it? Philip's here. He wants a word with you."

Susan's ears began to drum.

"Yes?" she said helplessly. "But I think perhaps——"

"It's not my business, of course. I'll be clearing

out of the room, if that'll relieve your mind. Here he is."

Hunt's voice came to the point at once.

"Are you alone for a second, Susan? Has he left you alone?"

"Yes. But why——"

"Nothing awkward after I left?"

"No, but I haven't known quite what you said——"

"It isn't what I said. It's what he's managed to find out."

"Find out——" Susan breathed. "Oh, what do you mean?"

"Nothing. It was nothing, in the end. He's just where he started. But they phoned him from Miller's Heath about your bag——"

The door of the living-room opened and Hammond walked out into the passage.

"Yes?" Susan said, rather jerkily. Her ears seemed to drum more loudly than ever.

"So he knows where we went. And if he asks you if they took it that we were married, there, admit it, and say why."

"Yes," she said again, mechanically. Hammond had gone over to a coat hanging against the wall.

"I couldn't think of a better way of letting you know, Susan. Don't be alarmed about him. He had an attack of violent wind-up, but he got over it. He's all right now."

"Yes."

"Still alone?"

"No." Try as she would, she couldn't prevent herself from glancing at Hammond. And at that moment he glanced back at her, over his shoulder.

"I'd better ring off, then. Just remember, if he asks you, to be open about it."

"Yes, I see. Good-bye——"

"And this call's from Laura. You realize that? Better not to get him on the jump again. If he wants to know what she said——"

Hunt's voice seemed to blur into a jumble, for Hammond suddenly strode up to her.

"Let me have a word before you ring off."

"Good-bye," Susan said again, and put the telephone down. It clattered a little. His hand actually touched it for a second before it settled with a click into its catch. He wrenched it up again. His left hand fumbled against the dial. Then he stood rigidly still. Suddenly his arm swung down, and there was another click.

"I didn't know what you said, Johnny——" She was almost breathless.

No silence had ever been as terrible as this, as they stood staring at each other in that strip of passage. She couldn't move back towards the room because he was blocking the way. She ran her hand along the wall at the side of her, and wondered why she hadn't told him, and let him speak if he still wanted to. Yes, she ought to have told him, and left it to Hunt to put right, at his end. It was conscience making an utter fool of her.

"Better not to get him on the jump again." So it had begun, at last!

She was badly frightened. Not of Johnny himself, of course. How could he ever inspire anything in the nature of fear, in anyone? But frightened of the change that had swept over him. His eyes were fixed.

The colour had faded from his face, and pallor seemed grotesque upon him. The hand that had dropped to his side was clutching at the edge of his coat, twisting among the folds of it. He was frightened too. She had never seen him look like that before.

"Yes, you knew what I said," he told her finally, and the fear ran through his voice. "Why did you ring off?"

"I didn't know. I heard you speak, but it might have been anything. I didn't know——"

The fixity of his gaze was broken sharply off. It jerked away from her, wandered rather dazedly, then settled on the wall.

"But you did. I could see it." He swallowed. "You're lying, Sue."

Lying. . . .

"Yes, I did!" she broke out. "I did know, but I didn't want you to cut in just then. I just felt—I'd rather you didn't."

His hand rose, inevitably, to run through his hair. His movements were slow now, as though he were making them in a dream. And yet he looked strangely young in that moment. A boy, whom she must try so hard not to hurt.

"If you were just talking to Laura, why should you hang up like that?" He stammered a little. "Whoever you were talking to—whatever was being said—if it was something I wasn't to hear—if it was something you had to cover up before I got there——"

He was afraid of mentioning Hunt's name. How afraid he was! She could read no other emotion in his face beyond that. His eyes moved to her and

moved away again. It was to be left to her to get command of the situation. A spasm of fright to deal with. No steady, probing questions, under which she might have faltered. No calm, stern dignity, to appal her with a sense of guilt. Nothing but fright. Poor square-chinned Johnny!

She gathered her strength together.

"You're being so strange," she told him. "What am I to do, when you carry on like this? Why should I have anything to cover up? But you stand there glowering at me, and suddenly you pounce across and want to cut in on my call. You want to test me out with Laura. Why should I let you? What's wrong with you?"

He brought his eyes back to her. She endured his gaze until it wavered away again. Then she was able to take hold of his arm. It was quite limp now.

"Let's go in and sit down," she said.

They walked back along the passage, her fingers still closed over his arm. She felt almost as if she were guiding someone who was blind. His hand trailed along the wall.

He halted, at the doorway.

"You'd better go to bed," he said. "You've been shaken up. And I—I've been shaken up a bit too. That's the only excuse I can give. You'll be better resting in bed, and I'll be better—all on my own down here."

He turned into the room, leaving the door wide behind him, just as it was. And after a long moment of indecision, Susan went slowly up the stairs.

She undressed and got into bed, in case he should come up and wonder why she hadn't. She tried to

read for awhile, but the effort at concentration seemed to set her head spinning. Everything was very still, down below. Time after time she was on the point of leaping out and running down to him. But if she did that, she would have to speak of it all again. No, in the morning, when they were both calmer. . . . Or perhaps it would be all gone again by the morning.

But if only she could have run down and settled in her chair, with him sprawling beside her, blinking into the fire with untroubled eyes. He had been frightened with Hunt, and he had got over it. He must get over it again now. They couldn't worry and frighten him. He mustn't really know. . . . How terrible if he really knew. . . .

She slipped out to her feet and wandered restlessly about until she was afraid he might hear her. She crept back to bed and lay there while the hours dragged by interminably. Finally she fell into a light doze, to wake again with an uneasy start. It was after twelve, and she was still alone.

It was impossible to stand it any longer. She pulled on her dressing-gown and went to the door. Mechanically she returned to comb out her tousled hair before the glass, and swathe the gown more tightly and becomingly around her. Her thoughts were running ahead desperately, forming into words. I didn't understand you, Johnny. Tell me what was wrong, so that I can put it right. She must attack it boldly, if he was to be reassured. Or if he seemed to be himself again, already. . . . I just came down to sit with you, Johnny. I've been up there so long alone. . . .

Noiselessly down the stairs. Perhaps he was asleep. Funny if he had merely fallen asleep. The door of

the living-room was almost closed now. But not quite. She pushed at it, thrust her head round.

Hammond was sunk in his chair, his face turned slightly back. His eyes were shut, but he was not asleep, because Katrine was perched on the chair-arm, and one of her hands was moving slowly across his forehead. And her other hand was down upon his knee, with his closed tightly over it.

Susan walked back up the stairs, and stood for a long while in the middle of the bedroom floor. Then, when she began to realize that she was trembling from head to foot, she slipped into bed again, and lay very still.

CHAPTER XIV

THE LETTER

WITH the morning, it was back to the every day. Everything just the same, apparently, except for the constant wonder . . . is it *really* the same? Wasn't Johnny a little more silent in his manner, a little noisier in his movements? And then, even as the wonder arose, he would be normal again. He would talk and laugh and fluff up her hair. And then, as she tried to set her mind at ease, the restlessness would come back into his hands, and his eyes would stray away, and she would wonder again, frenziedly.

Ellis was quieter too, perhaps, now that she came to think of it. He didn't talk to her so much. He waited for her to speak first. There was a touch of deference in his voice that she couldn't quite understand. And the subject of "Mr. Hunt" he had dropped completely. If he had to mention him at all in passing, he usually managed to walk around the matter. She barely noticed, for awhile. And then the heavy delicacy of it began almost to shriek itself aloud. She wanted to ask him what he meant, and why. She wanted to run up and hide away in her bedroom. Ellis. . . . But he couldn't! How could he? But if he did . . .

And Katrine. . . . Anything might lie at the back of those slow eyes of hers. She couldn't know, either,

in her few hours. But one fear was apt to beget another, and already Susan both hated and feared Katrine.

About Laura there was of course no doubt at all.

"What are you going to do?" she asked, when they happened to be alone together. "Which is it going to be?"

Susan stared at her wordlessly, and finally managed an answer.

"Do? Nothing. What could I do?"

"Just hang on to the one you want, that's all. That's what I'd do. I'm sorry for Johnny, though."

A hand seemed to close around Susan's throat.

"He's all right, if you're fond of children," Laura went on. "But I suppose you'd have to grow out of him sooner or later."

"I couldn't leave him! I could never do that!"

"You could let him arrange——"

"No! Leaving him alone. He's been frightened ——"

"They get over their frights at that age. What d'you put his age at? Fifteen? And he mightn't be left alone for long."

A prickling ran across Susan's head.

"No. I've heard that before. He might soon have someone else running him. But I prefer not to put it to the test."

"That's not being in love with him."

"It's being—fond of him. It might come pretty near it."

"You can't be in love with two men at once."

"No——" Susan put up a hand and passed it over her forehead. "I know. I know!"

"Easiest in the end to let the tide carry you on, I should think. Philip has a gift for getting what he wants, if he wants it enough. You can make all the resolutions you like——"

Susan's hand dropped slowly down again.

"But you ought to bear it in mind," Laura added.

And two days later, on the Friday morning, Hammond, grovelling in the corner of the shop among the stock of pictures, suddenly made his announcement.

"I've arranged for that extra capital, Hunt. My uncle—— It's all settled. You can leave any time now. To-day—if you like."

Hunt could stare at him quite openly, because his glance was wandering in the maddening way that seemed to have become a habit with him lately. Hunt could watch the uneasy mouth and the nervous hands . . . watch them at his pleasure until his surprise had cleared a little. Get it over by all means. But to be shown out the same week, to have it thrust upon him while he was still more or less unprepared . . .

"To-day'll suit me," he said levelly. "Let's clear up the whole thing and I'll cut off this evening."

"And you'll be going—where?"

"Don't know from Adam." Hunt paused. When he spoke again his voice was slower. "Paris for a spell, probably, when I've made a few further arrangements."

"When?"

Their eyes met and held for a second or two.

"Why?" Hunt inquired.

Hammond's gaze broke off.

"I just wondered when we'd be seeing the last of you."

Hunt smiled faintly after a moment.

"A little crude, Hammond. To-morrow morning, then, as you seem anxious about it. Ellis can get rid of my stuff for me. I don't want to hang around and see the place after I've left, anyway."

"I'm not anxious about it." Hammond's eyes moved back. There was obvious battle in them. "It's just the upheaval, that's all. Better to finish with it. I didn't want you to go, did I? You suggested it. I didn't—— I never dreamed of you breaking clean off. I can't get used to the idea of it. It'll be strange here without you——"

Their eyes held for a little longer this time. Then they fell away together.

"I'll be finding it strange too, first of all," Hunt muttered.

Hammond was still for awhile. Then he went back to scrabble among the pictures again. Finally his head jerked up.

"You'd better say good-bye this evening," he said. "Better say good-bye to Sue this evening."

"Oh—had I?" Hunt diverted himself now by keeping his gaze steadily fixed, and sending that upward glance faltering away again.

"Yes—finish with it. I'll ask her to be in around six, and I'll take you in to see her just before you leave."

"Will you? Thanks."

You'll take me in, will you? *You'll* take me in!

It was a slack afternoon. Every minute of it dragged hideously, yet whenever Hunt looked at his watch, it was to think how desperately short his time was

running. Three more hours. . . . Only two and a half. . . . Get it all over quickly, he had thought. But he hadn't prepared himself for the ordeal of these last few hours. He stared around at the books and the pots, the new crystal head, the oils on their stands, the water-colours on the far wall. They seemed to stare back at him. He couldn't go round and touch them all. He couldn't play the fool in front of Hammond. But he picked one up now and then to change its position, and lingered to the uttermost before setting it down.

And Hammond was going to take him in to say good-bye. When he'd left it all, when he'd had his last look round, Hammond would conduct him in to Susan and watch him say good-bye.

Dragging minutes that would never come again. . . . Leaving it all for good. . . . And Hammond wouldn't keep still. Not for a moment would he keep still. Even if he stopped being all feet for awhile, he became all hands. The tension slowly tightened. Words that passed between them were as brief as they could make them. Once Hammond, in a rambling walk, knocked one of the pots with his elbow. He spun round and caught it again, but the shock nearly snapped the tension altogether. Hunt found himself suddenly wanting to smash them all up, to whirl his arms madly and send them all crashing at his feet.

When Ellis came in to lock up, and the thing was finished, he didn't give his final look round. He walked straight through the door with his eyes ahead of him.

Hammond was following. They entered the living-room together, to find Susan waiting before the fire. She stood up, as though she were not quite aware of

what she was doing. "Hunt'll be looking in at the end of the afternoon to say good-bye. He's cutting off to-day." Casual words, dropped at lunch. Incredible words. And all the afternoon she had waited.

They looked at each other for a moment. The room seemed full of Hammond. His foot kicked against the leg of a chair. His hands came and fiddled along the mantelpiece.

"Pity Katrine isn't here too," Hunt observed. "We'd have had a proper little farewell gathering."

"Yes," Hammond agreed. "But she went along to see Blair again. He's taking her out somewhere."

He almost had another mishap with an earthenware flower-jug. Hunt's teeth grated slightly behind his unmoved mouth.

"Well—good-bye," he said to Susan. He managed a half-turn from Hammond. "It's been very pleasant, knowing you. Especially since we became better friends."

"Yes—for me too. Good-bye." Susan paused hopelessly. Hammond's roving eyes had settled on her. Surely there were things one ought to be saying, on an occasion like this. She thought of things her mother had said, and forced herself on. "You must come and see us again, if you care to. You—you know where we are, anyway."

Hunt's mouth twitched up at the corners, but the effect was hardly a smile.

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you."

Just a minute would be enough, he was thinking. Half a minute. Ten seconds. . . . If he'd clear out for ten seconds. . . .

He turned back.

"What about a word with Ellis? Would you fetch him in, Hammond?"

"Why not see him on your way out?" Hammond suggested. "He'd think it a bit odd—in here."

"All right. On my way out, then." All right, damn you! Hunt's eyes went to the desk in the corner of the room. "By the way, before I go, there's a letter I'd like to write. I'll do it on the spot, if you don't mind."

"Go ahead," Hammond told him.

Hunt strolled across to the desk and sat down. He unscrewed his fountain-pen slowly, inspected the note-paper, drew out a sheet with the letter-heading.

"Shan't be writing on it after to-day," he remarked. "So I'll use it for the last time—on this."

He glanced up.

"You don't think me too unmannerly, I hope? I won't take long."

Neither of them answered him. From the other side of the room they were both watching him as though half fascinated.

Hunt looked down at the paper for a moment. Then he began to write. His pen slid along without a sound. He paused now and then, tapping it idly on the desk. Once he glanced up again.

"Couldn't you talk, or move about a bit?" he said.

Hammond's foot crashed against the kerb of the fireplace.

Hunt finished his letter and read it through. Finally he folded it, slipped it into an envelope, wrote across it, picked up a sheet of blotting-paper merely to toy with it and put it down again, then stood up.

"While I remember——" he said. He walked to the door. "Ellis!"

Hurrying feet. "Yes, Mr. Hunt?"

"You'd better deliver this personally, when you go home. If you can't get hold of him for any reason, drop it back on me, will you?"

"Yes, Mr. Hunt. I understand."

"And in case I don't see you again, Ellis——" A crackling passed from hand to hand.

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Hunt. Thank you very much."

Hunt came back a step into the room.

"We don't want to spin this act out, do we?" he said. "It's like seeing someone off on a train that won't start. Suppose I have mercy on you and clear off. Good evening to both of you."

He inclined his head slightly to Susan. His eyes turned to Hammond. His right hand lifted automatically for an inch or so, and halted. Hammond's, tight around the edge of his coat, unclosed, faltered, and closed again. Hunt threw a brief smile from one to the other, and went out. A moment later the street door shut with a brisk click that sent a tremor through Susan's head.

Hammond stood looking into the fire. Usually, at the end of the day's work, he made straight for the bathroom, but to-day he seemed to be putting off his "freshener." He stood very still, leaning forward on one hand, but the cigarette that was held between two of his fingers moved so tremulously that the smoke curled up in twists and eddies. Susan turned over the leaves of a book on the table. The very air seemed to be throbbing around her. Why hadn't he gone upstairs and left her alone just for a minute or two?

And had the whole thing really come to an end, now, with the shutting of that street door ?

Ellis was padding around in the kitchen. It must be nearly time for him to go.

She closed the book suddenly, and with a murmured word walked through the door and hurried up the stairs to the bedroom. She was only half-way across it when Hammond entered behind her. She went to the dressing-table and ran a buffer over her nails, backwards and forwards endlessly. He toyed with his tie, and brushed his hair. They spoke at intervals. They repeated the same things occasionally, but neither of them noticed it.

Susan left the bedroom and went downstairs into the living-room again. She had barely reached the fire-place before Hammond walked in behind her.

She looked round at him over her shoulder, every nerve on edge. Ellis was moving plates on the dresser, by the sound of it. And it must be now past the time for Ellis to go.

Suddenly Hammond pulled the door open again. She heard him walk along and into the shop. Almost immediately, Ellis stood on the threshold.

" I'm just off, madam. Good evening."

She didn't answer. Her eyes were upon the envelope he held out. She found herself taking it, gazing down at the bold scrawl across it. " Mrs. John Hammond."

It was too mad to be believed. He had sat there writing it before them. He had strolled past them and given it to Ellis just outside the door. Yes, Ellis. . . . Hunt's henchman to the last.

As he went off down the passage she ran up the stairs again. She wanted to look round all the way

for eyes that might be watching her. She felt frightened, horribly guilty. She felt that she could never look Ellis in the face again.

She closed the door and stood breathless against it. Then she tore the note open. It began without any preliminary at all.

"I will have to send this on its way through Ellis. Forgive me, but he knows already.

"I am not saying good-bye to you, Susan. I have decided quite definitely that I am not saying good-bye to you. If you don't want to drag through a further batch of hysterics from Hammond, you can leave with me in the morning. I'll have the car waiting outside my place from nine o'clock onwards, and we'll be off the minute you come. If it's easier to slip out without luggage, don't bring any. If you haven't a passport, we'll have to wait around to get one, but I'll see to it that the time doesn't hang heavily on our hands.

"If you don't favour the clean break, that will mean, of course, a conference with Hammond. I'll give you until lunch-time. After that, I'll be round to discuss the whole matter with him. If you prefer this way, there's no need to be alarmed about it. You can leave it to me. There'll be a scene, but he'll see reason in the end.

"As to any question of leaving the thing as it is, you must put that out of your mind. Not even you can stop me from going through with it now, let alone Hammond.

"PHILIP."

She came to an end. She began mechanically to

read it through once more, but she stopped. Although the words had jumped before her eyes, she had gathered enough. She couldn't go through it again.

There was a vague sound of movement and voices downstairs. That would be Ellis saying good-bye to Johnny. Johnny might be coming up. She looked around her. She heard a breathless kind of gasp. It was odd to realize that it came from her own throat.

If she burnt Hunt's letter up here, he would see the ash of it. She tore it into small pieces, wrapped them round in a handkerchief. She could burn them later.

Her breath still seemed to shudder as it came through her teeth. She would phone! She could easily do that from Laura's, or a call-box.

And she would say, "No—no!" And he would merely answer, "Yes."

She thrust the handkerchief at the back of a drawer. As she stood there as though petrified into stillness again, a strange memory flicked for an instant across her mind. She was a small child, very shy, very much under authority, briskly led by the wrist through a toy bazaar. She had pulled back suddenly, round-eyed, before a great stack of coloured humming-tops. She had stretched out for one at the bottom. It was the most magnificent one she had ever seen. She had taken it in both hands. . . . And then, relentlessly, everything had begun to lurch and fall around her, and voices had clamoured in her ears, and she had stood there in a stupor of fright, powerless to do anything at all. . . .

Hammond had paused, beyond the shop door. Barely ten seconds, before Ellis was in the hall. He

had acted at once, then. There could be no doubt now. None at all. No need for further frantic ponderings.

The raging in Hammond's head suddenly stilled.

He walked out into the hall. He could hear Susan running up the stairs, but his eyes were upon Ellis, bustling into his overcoat. He leaned a shoulder against the wall and watched him.

"Going straight back, Ellis?" he inquired pleasantly.

"Yes, Mr. Hammond."

Ellis looked at him with a touch of uneasiness. But it was the same voice as usual, wasn't it? Or . . . wasn't it?

"Not forgetting Hunt's letter, are you?"

"No, Mr. Hammond." Ellis moistened his lips. "I'll leave it on my way." That faint gleam of a smile in Hammond's eyes. . . . Or was it a smile?

"Sure you haven't dropped it? Sure you've got it on you?"

"Yes, Mr.——" Ellis broke off, backing instinctively away. For Hammond had reached out a hand. He pulled him near. "Mr. Hammond—please——"

It wasn't the strength in the hand that scared him so much. It was that something like a smile in Hammond's eyes. No, not a smile. . . .

"I'm not going to manhandle you, Ellis," Hammond said softly. "And I don't want to see, far less read, that note. But I do want to know if you've still got it. That's all."

His hands closed around Ellis's sides, over the flat pockets. Ellis struggled helplessly, in a sweat. The hands ran over the inside of his coat, clapped against his waistcoat, halted, let him go.

Ellis moved a step or two, and paused, and waited.

Useless to say he *had* dropped it, literally. Trifling with Hammond at the moment was the last thing on earth that appealed to him. He sweated and puzzled and waited.

"That'll have to be that, I'm afraid, Ellis," Hammond observed. "I'll send you along a cheque in the morning."

Ellis swallowed, and played stiffly with his lapels, and thought of his afternoons off, and the amiable smile that had always greeted his request for them, and his ample holidays whenever Hammond had had a hand in settling them, and Hammond's breezy tolerance over past discrepancies in the housekeeping accounts. And he thought that surely there had never been a bigger fool than Henry Ellis.

"I'd prefer not to be approached over references," Hammond added. "But you ought to get quite a beauty from Hunt. Or perhaps he'll fit you into something else while he's about it. You never know. I've no doubt you'll be all right."

Ellis wondered for a moment if it were any good trying out a touch of the pathetic. An appeal had always turned Hammond's heart to water. No . . . not now. Hopeless to attempt it now. Under those eyes he couldn't produce a single word.

He moved away after awhile, and opened the door . . . a meek little figure in his bowler hat. He looked back. But Hammond was now walking towards the stairs.

Susan turned from the dressing-table as he entered the room. He stood just inside the door. Then he walked on, towards her. He took her chin in his hand and tilted it back.

"Let's go out to-night," he said. "Let's dress up for a meal, anyway. And let's take Hunt. We ought to give him a proper send-off. We can't leave it as it is."

His fingers were quite still, around her face, and the feel of them brought her near to panic.

"No, not to-night. Not all three of us——"

"Why not?" He touched her forehead, cleared now of its strapping. "Because of this? No one'll notice it. Hardly anything to notice. You start getting ready, and I'll phone him."

He went back to the door and she ran after him. He turned inquiringly, and her heart gave a sudden thud.

"No——" she said.

"Why not?"

She couldn't think why not. She seemed to have stopped thinking altogether.

"He'll be busy——"

"I'll phone him and see."

Hunt's refusal was more blatant. It took longer to fight.

"But we've never had a festive evening together, Hunt—the three of us. Let's make up for it to-night. It's the last one, isn't it? The last one——"

Hunt, rigid in his room, gazed at the opposite wall. Trying to rub it delicately in, or playing simple again?

"As we're saying good-bye to you, Hunt—and it might be for good, for all we know—I think we ought to do it more elaborately. We ought to make a special occasion of it, one that we'll all remember. At least, you will want to remember it, won't you? Of course,

if you'd rather sit quietly on your own, I'll understand——"

"I've got packing to do."

"Oh, I'll understand, of course."

Hunt's gaze narrowed slightly.

"But I'd like you to come, Hunt. The evening's on me, naturally. Two of us, saying good-bye to one of you. It's up to me."

"No," Hunt said suddenly, and his smile sounded faintly in his voice. "It's up to me."

The words shot through Hammond's brain and left it still again.

"Two of us," he repeated. "And one of you."

"I'll stand it."

"No."

"We'll share."

"No. But call in for us around seven-fifteen. Good-bye."

CHAPTER XV

"*THINGS GROW——*"

SUSAN, with Hammond at one side of her and Hunt at the other, let her eyes stray beyond them, around the room. She studied idly the anxious little man at the next table, obviously out with his wife and daughter. He was handing them the menu, and looking diffidently from one to the other as though he accepted full responsibility for it. She thought he would rather be at home with his slippers on, in front of the fire. And she thought, What on earth am I doing, sitting here the same as everyone else, trying to look as though I'm out for a gay evening? What have we all dressed up for? Why did we have to have this mad nightmare thrust upon us? And what's going to happen to us tomorrow? What shall I say? What shall I do?

When Hunt had called in for them, she had met his eyes for a second and given a faint shake of her head. He had responded with a faint nod, the hint of a smile.

She would have to talk to Johnny herself in the end, before he had a chance to. Her way of talking to him would be so different, and she could prepare him. She could tell him not to listen to Hunt. She could soothe him and say that everything was really all right. . . .

She ran her fingers together, under the table, and went on staring around her.

Hunt and Hammond were opposite each other, and the rest of the room did not exist, for them. Hammond's easy chatter was at full flow, and Hunt was answering whenever an answer seemed required. But something was puzzling him. His glance kept returning to Hammond's left hand, which was casually fingering a fork. That hand was as steady as iron.

A meal to go through. What an ordeal eating could be, when you didn't want to. They all made an attempt at it.

"Well—we must have a toast," Hammond said, when their glasses had been filled. "Let's drink to all of us. Let's drink to Sue." She looked at him quickly. He looked back at her, endlessly. "Sue, of the wide, clear eyes——" The pause seemed to go on and on. Then he took his gaze away. "And to Hunt, who's going off because he always makes a point of doing—just as he wants." His eyes lingered upon Hunt's now until in the end he drove them down. "And I suppose you might as well drink to me too. Johnny Hammond, the easy-going, the kind, the world's prize fool."

They made no answer. They took up their glasses automatically. They sat looking at him as he raised his own. Hunt watched his hand, still as steady as iron. Susan, her face beginning to grow cold, looked for a moment into his eyes, and helplessly away.

"It's funny, saying good-bye to Hunt," he went on. "I've known Hunt—oh, it must be about eleven years by now. I remember when first we hitched up, as it were." His eyes left them for once, and wandered thoughtfully off. "We met at school, of course. He was a year older than I was, and a bit taller, then.

It was my first day there, and he came up to me with a load of books and said, 'Going back to the form-room? Just run these in for me.' Funny, you know, how these things start."

He brought his gaze back and sipped at his wine again.

"I'll be coming over all sentimental in a minute."

Still they did not answer. Hunt had begun to toy with the edge of the cloth.

"And after that we seemed to get well away in no time," Hammond said. "Excuse all the memories, Sue, but you see, Hunt's going off and leaving us—— Lord, yes, the things that come back! He used to like to cut a figure at debating. Oh, he was magnificent! What a delivery he had! He used to make 'em laugh like hell sometimes. But he wasn't quite so good at knocking together the actual speeches beforehand, and I was rather a nib at it. So we fitted in quite well in that too. And I remember later on—yes, we must have been around nineteen and twenty then—he started an *affaire* with a girl in a tobacconist's shop, and I had the job of persuading her in the end that he'd been sent down, and couldn't meet her any more."

"Hammond, if you're going to keep up much of this——" Hunt broke in.

"Oh, no, I could go on for ever. I could go on stringing out incident after incident. Eleven years is a long time. Yes, Hunt, I've said it before, and I'll say it again. It's going to be damned funny to be without you!"

A subdued argument was going on at the near-by table. The little man appeared to be in disgrace at the moment. Hammond glanced round, and back.

"Looks pretty easy to manage, up to a point, doesn't he?" he remarked. "Rather like me. Easy-going——" He sipped at his glass again. "Up to a point," he added, as he set it down.

Hunt stopped fingering the cloth. They sat very still, looking at each other.

"Well, drink up," Hammond said. "Let's keep things on the move. I suppose you meant me to see through that business of the note, by the way, Hunt?"

Susan found her voice in a breathless little cry.

"Oh, Johnny——"

He didn't look at her. He kept his eyes on Hunt. His face showed nothing but a mild inquiry. He might have been discussing the next day's weather.

Hunt answered after a pause,

"I didn't much care. You had to know, anyway."

"Johnny——" Susan touched his hand, and drew back as he turned his eyes upon her. "You can't—— We can't talk like this!"

He looked at Hunt again.

"I've almost known for some time," he said. "You've made excuses, where none were really needed. Your explanations came out too pat. Why shouldn't she have been in your flat that evening, and when I phoned you there, why didn't you let me know at once, instead of waiting till you heard I was coming round myself? And why did she start avoiding you, and why did you try to make an alibi out of the book show——" He leant back as the waiter changed his plate, then studied the dish before him with grave concentration. "And what's this supposed to be?"

"Oh, to hell with your plate and what's on it——"

"Don't get on edge, Hunt. Yes, I almost knew, but

never quite. That was the——" He halted momentarily. His voice had almost changed. "That was the worst of it. Not really knowing. Not letting myself dwell on it more than I could help because I thought it was foul of me. Yes, I thought it was quite foul of me, sometimes. It's good to have got over that, anyway. I wasn't even entirely sure when I saw you stop yourself from blotting that envelope, though it was the nearest I'd been."

Susan tried to speak again, but she was afraid to produce her own voice. And he would turn his head and look at her, if she did—— She could watch him, while he didn't look at her. She sat dazedly staring her fill.

Hunt fiddled with his knife and fork and flung them down.

"I'll just mention that we didn't rush headlong into anything. I said I'd leave, didn't I?"

"That doesn't interest me, Hunt." Hammond passed Susan the condiments, and she took them vaguely, and moved them with her hands, and left them where they were.

"No?"

"Not a bit."

"I don't suppose it does. I was going to cut loose and leave things as they were—give up the whole show for nothing—and that wouldn't have interested you either! But this will—unless you've read that note already?"

"Haven't even seen the outside of it."

"No, you can't—no——" Susan suddenly rose desperately to her feet.

"Sit down, Sue." Hammond didn't even turn his head this time.

She sat down again. She felt as if her legs would not hold her longer, in any case.

"I said I'd take her with me in the morning," Hunt went on, "or we'd talk it all out with you—leave it to you."

"I wasn't going! Johnny, I'd never——"

"Leave what to me?" Hammond inquired.

There was a flame in Hunt's eyes. Nervousness or panic he could have coped with. But the maddening quality of this easy quietness was reaching its peak.

"God in heaven, you know what we're talking about, don't you? Sitting there like a wooden image——"

"You're getting hysterical, Hunt. And we're in a public place. That's my fault, I know, but I didn't bargain for a scene quite like this. What's happened to the tight-set mouth and the steely control?" He eyed him with a hint of amusement. "You're forgetting to dramatize yourself. And we happen to be entertaining my wife, and she seems a little on edge herself, without any fresh example from you. Let's have quiet, before we're turned out."

Susan herself was utterly still now, staring at him again. He met the stare with his mild gaze. He began to speak to her, as one explaining a simple thing in a simple form.

"Hunt gets tired of things, you know. He always has. Tired of all the various interests that cropped up, and all the various—other diversions——"

Hunt's hand jerked so violently that Hammond put his lightly around the vase in the centre of the table, to steady it from mishap. He began to turn it slowly round and round.

"Very tired he gets, and very quickly. Of course,

in special circumstances he might be faithful for as long as six months. I don't know. He might. And then a strange feminine handkerchief might come to light from one of his pockets. It's always the same pocket that he puts those in."

Slowly, the vase continued to turn. Susan sat as still as death. The whole room, the whole world, at that moment, seemed to hold nothing but his face.

Hunt's voice tore into the pause.

"You can spare your breath over that, Hammond! Spare the stray knife in the back. She knows she's not the first woman I've ever met, but she knows I'm offering her something completely different—something your thick-headed doltishness could never understand in a lifetime!"

"Oh, she knows that?"

"She knows I'm waiting——"

Susan's fingers closed over the edge of the table, but her eyes did not move.

"Will you listen——" she jerked out. "Will you listen to me——"

"Later." Hammond was looking across at Hunt. The vase still moved slowly round and round. "Try it on," he said. "Try it on, as a kind of grand climax. Take her off. But I'd find you."

The vase stopped. It was almost a shock to see it stop.

"I wouldn't kill you, naturally." That easiness of his voice was worse than grotesque now. "That'ud come back on me, and it wouldn't be worth it. But it would mean that your style would be rather cramped in future, because you'd have precious few teeth left by the time I'd finished, and that dominant nose of

yours would be too badly smashed up for even a plastic surgeon to do much with. There'd be other things I could do, too—— Yes, I won't go into them now, but I'd think them out. We'd have a grand half-hour."

The muscles of Susan's face seemed to contract with a sharp tremor. Slowly her eyes came down to rest upon those hands of his, on the table. She stared at them as though she had never seen them before.

Hunt's mouth moved sideways. He gave a short laugh, and then a strange blink. Hammond smiled too.

"Afraid?" he said.

Hunt did not answer for a moment. When he did, his voice was slightly raised.

"Of you? My God, Hammond, if you sit there with that look on your face a minute longer——"

Two chairs rasped at once. The little man and his wife and daughter were gazing at them aghast. Hammond nodded to them with benevolent reassurance.

"I thought it'ud come to it," he murmured. "One of us had better clear off. You, for instance. You haven't been eating, anyway."

Hunt turned his face to Susan. He seemed to brace it for a second.

"If you want to leave this maniac to finish his evening on his own, I'll take you back."

Was he speaking to her? What was he saying?

"He seems to be waiting for you to answer, Sue," Hammond told her.

"What— Oh, no, don't put me in a position like this! What am I supposed to answer? What have I got to answer?"

"She'll be leaving with me, shortly," Hammond said. "And she'll be quieter, left alone. But if we keep this up we'll all be shown out together."

Susan put a hand up to her forehead to smooth back a strand of hair. She kept it there a moment, to try to cool the heat of it. The blur of conversation around her seemed to shriek in her ears, and quieten again. She looked at her plate and fingered her knife and fork helplessly. And after awhile she heard Hammond's voice.

"Don't bother with it—if you don't want to."

She raised her eyes. With a faint sense of shock she saw that they were alone. Hunt had gone.

"No need to be polite, or anything," Hammond said.

No need to be polite, or anything. . . . He had said that before. Over the Benedictine in the "Duke of Wellington." She wanted to put her head down on the table and cry . . . and cry . . .

"I'm not really hungry——" She had to say something.

"Leave it, then. It's all right."

They were silent a long while.

"I've held back from you," he said at last. "Did you know that? I've held back from you quite a lot. You told me in the beginning how you felt, and you're very young, after all. So sometimes I've found myself being—very wary with you. And while I was feeling that, he steps in with all his years of practice behind him. He might have started with holding back too, but it's not how he ended."

"I wouldn't have gone——" She seemed to have been saying it for hours. "I'd never have left you."

"You said—things grew. I wonder why you said that."

Their plates were taken. He ordered coffee. She looked at the cup as it was set before her. If he had said that she needn't drink it, she would have been glad to push it away. But as he gazed down at the cloth without a word she managed to sip it through.

"We'd better go now," he said finally.

He settled the bill and they left. He hailed a cab.

"Straight back?" he said.

"Please——"

They sat looking ahead of them. She wondered if she had seen the last of Hunt now—what he would do the next day. It hadn't occurred to her to think of it before. That terrible meal had meant nothing but Johnny's face, and Johnny's voice, and Johnny's hands.

In the hall passage, she looked up at a pair of fur gloves slung over a hook. Katrine's. They had been there all day.

But Katrine didn't matter any more. She no longer had to hate and fear her. It seemed that she just didn't matter. And she would go again. . . .

They went into the living-room. The fire was still glowing. He poked at it, put more coal on. He stood there before it, and she stood near the door, watching him, her eyes full of him.

After a time she rubbed her fingers mechanically over her bare arms, and at once he turned his head.

"Here, you'd better come and get warm." He pulled an arm-chair near the fire.

"Yes—thank you——"

She sat down and he moved away. He walked slowly about the room, and she watched him, all the

time. The silence was spinning out hopelessly, but she could only wait for him to speak again. He looked older, in his evening clothes, with his hair so sleek. She wished he could have been wearing a check flannel shirt.

"Warmer?" he said.

"Yes, thank you."

"Perhaps you'd be better the other side, away from the door?"

"No, I'm very comfortable, thank you——"

"Well, don't be so meek with me. No need for that."

They lapsed into silence again. He went on moving around and she went on watching him.

"And Katrine's got our spare room," he muttered, as though out of the midst of his thoughts. "And even if I turn in on that odd mattress in the junk room she'll wonder what's in the wind. I suppose it means just going on as we always have, while she's here. It's in a case like this that marriage can be—the reverse of picturesque."

She drew her eyes away from him, for the first time. She seemed to have grown smaller, sunk in the deep arm-chair. Her head was bent down, her face half hidden from him. He came and stood near her. She trembled at the nearness of him.

He spoke again suddenly.

"You did tell me in the beginning how you felt, didn't you? And you *are* very young. And you weren't going, anyway. Don't worry about it. It's all right— It couldn't have been with him, that's all. If it had been someone different, who'd have stuck to you and treated you well, I might have done

something——" He paused. "No, it's no good lying over it. I don't think I would, even then."

She looked up at him again. He gazed back at her for a moment. Then, as he was on the point of turning away, she caught at his hand. She held it tightly with both hers. It grew very stiff, but she still clung to it.

"I kept telling you I wouldn't have gone, didn't I? It was all I seemed to have in my mind—that I could never do it. Not with him—not with anyone else——"

His fingers turned, within hers.

"Will you let go of my hand?" His voice was a little quicker, a little lower. "I don't want to have to pull it away from you."

"I don't want to let go of it——"

"Do you know why I staged that scene in public? It was so that I could be sure of myself. But if you start anything like this now——"

She put her face down upon the hand.

"It wasn't just being—respectable, or thinking it was just—duty or anything. It was knowing I couldn't be happy away from you, that I'd feel lost away from you, that nothing would ever be the same again. That's what it is, really—isn't it?"

She heard his voice again after awhile.

"What—what is?"

"When things grow——"

He made no answer at all. She kept her face down upon his hand.

"You sort of wait for something violent to happen. You think it's got to come upon you in a great flash. And when something violent does, you think that's—it. But you don't realize it's growing underneath,

because it's too quiet. Just on and on from day to day, starting with just being happy with someone, and liking to see them when you wake up, and liking to see their things about——" Her voice shook a little. "And you don't know how far it's gone until you're suddenly brought up against the bare idea of cutting loose. And then you begin to see— You begin to realize you can't be in love with two men at the same time——"

She moved her face against the hand.

"Do you think you could understand what I mean?"

She thought he was going to make no answer again. But it came in the end.

"I might—if I tried."

"Try, Johnny——"

She broke the next pause.

"I couldn't have gone, even if you wouldn't have cared much. Even if it was only fussing round because it was your nature to—I couldn't have gone." Her voice was still unsteady. "Even if it was only looking after me like you'd have looked after Katrine—or that kitten—or the organ-grinder's—monkey."

He drew her up to her feet after a moment.

"What?" he said.

"That was just what I felt. But it isn't like that, is it? I saw, this evening."

"Like what? What are you trying to say?"

"It doesn't matter. Silly things that have passed through my head— I've told myself that I wasn't jealous of her, but I was mad jealous. That ought to have shown me, anyway——"

"Katrine?" he said. He seemed half stupefied.

They stood very near. And suddenly as she put out a hand it was caught up. They were straining against each other, her arms about his shoulders, his clutching around her, their faces tight pressed, her hair mingling with his. He was saying something under his breath, his eyes shut. "God—oh, God——"

It was a long time before they moved. Then slowly he relaxed. He swung an arm under her knees and lifted her up, and sat down with her in the chair.

"Sue——"

She let the name play through her mind.

"I'm so glad you call me that——"

"You meant it all—you meant——"

"Much more than I could put into words."

Pauses didn't matter. Just spells of quietness. . . .

"I went a bit mad, I suppose, this evening, Sue. I went a bit mad at the same time that I went calm. But the suspense—it seemed to have been dragging the life out of me. I was sort of paralysed. I was scared, and I didn't dare think of it——"

"I know. I've felt it too. I know."

Quietness again.

"And things grow— It might have been true, then, even when you said it before?"

"It must have been true. Right from the start. But it *has* had its flash as well, after all. It did leap out with its burst of violence and its crash of cymbals—after all."

"What— When——"

"Over that dinner-table."

She moved more restlessly after awhile. She raised herself up.

"Why did it all have to happen? We were so

happy— I'm so sorry about it all ! I'm so sorry, Johnny ! ''

He drew her back. He re-settled her as she had been before.

" It's all right——'' he murmured. " It's all right——''

THE END

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